Is Lebanon’s confessional system sustainable?

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Abstract

This dissertation seeks to answer whether the confessional system is able to produce a stable democracy in Lebanon in the long-term. Power-sharing models – typified by Arend Lijphart’s typology of consociational democracy - are often deemed the solution to deeply fragmented societies such as Lebanon. Some claim that the country’s diverse denominational make-up necessitates the division of power along religious lines. This analysis concludes, however, that Lebanon’s confessional system is unsustainable in its current form, as it weakens the state and fragments the nation. The principle of power-sharing has introduced a cycle of clientelism and corruption which hinders Lebanon’s progression to full democracy. Furthermore, confessional structures leave those living outside the sectarian framework severely lacking in civil liberties. Its focus on the sect renders Lebanon vulnerable to rising religious strife outside its borders, as is evident in the Syrian ‘spillover’. In addition, confessionalism has also contributed to the rise of Hezbollah, an Islamist militia which at times exhibits greater political clout than the government itself. This essay proposes a hybrid system of government that would make Lebanese politics less of a ‘zero-sum game’ of sect against sect and allow national issues to take precedence.

Keywords: Lebanon, stable democracy, confessionalism, consociationalism.
Introduction

Since the assassination of Prime Minister Rafic Hariri in 2005, Lebanon has experienced a series of political crises. Despite successfully ousting Syrian troops from within its borders that same year, the spirit of the so-called ‘Cedar Revolution’ has not been enough to provide Lebanon with a stable government. On 22nd March 2013, the government collapsed once again following the resignation of Prime Minister Najib Mikati, just months ahead of the parliamentary elections due in June. Absolutely central to Lebanon’s political organisation is confessionalism, a model of government that divides political power along religious lines. This principle is embodied in the Lebanese political framework at the very head of government, where the President of the Republic is always a Maronite Christian, the Prime Minister a Sunni Muslim and the Speaker of Parliament a Shiite Muslim. Christians and Muslims are also granted a 50/50 ratio of representation in the legislature. Further to this, key positions such as the head of the armed forces, the Central Bank and the National University are allocated according to sectarian affiliation (Salamey 2009, p.83). This system permeates into every aspect of Lebanese society, as each citizen possesses an identity card inscribing their religious grouping as dictated from birth. The origins of the confessional structure can be traced back to the Ottoman Empire, where it was first recognised that the presence of many different dominations in the same small territory necessitated certain mediatory measures. The role of religious identity in national politics was further developed during the mutasarrifiyya era (1861-1920), the French mandate period (1920-1943) and in the National Pact of 1943. Confessionalism functioned remarkably well for 30 years following the National Pact and Lebanon was initially hailed as the great success story of power-sharing models. However, the country’s devastating Civil War (1975-1990) put paid to this idea. Despite the 1989 Taef Agreement’s stipulation that confessionalism eventually be abolished, no reform has yet been passed and Lebanon’s ‘democracy’ remains stagnant.
This essay seeks to answer whether or not confessionalism is a sustainable model of governance in Lebanon. Chapter I explores why Lebanon’s unique demographic make-up poses such a challenge to advocates of traditional majoritarian democracy, and how confessionalism developed as a response. Chapter II addresses Arend Lijphart’s theory of ‘consociational democracy’ and why it may be the solution to deeply divided societies. Chapter III seeks to answer whether consociational democracy is able to deliver a stable democracy in Lebanon. Within this, the Syrian crisis will serve as a case study of the present stresses on the confessional system. The final chapter is devoted to potential reforms to the system and their likelihood of being implemented. I will argue that confessionalism is not a viable system of government for Lebanon in the long-term, as it produces a weak state and barely-existent national identity, as well as being unable to deal with the new political and social realities facing the Lebanese people today. Moreover, I contend that confessional structures perpetuate a system of patronage that undermines the channels of democratic representation. The crux of my argument is that power-sharing democracy fails to account for the transnational nature of religious identity and the complex demographic and spatial dynamics at play within and outside of Lebanon’s borders.

Methodology and Literature Review

As the term ‘sustainable’ implies, there is a predictive element to this study. While this may appear dangerous ground to tread, this simply involves using patterns of history, institutional weaknesses and present pressures to determine the long-term viability of the Lebanese system. The criteria for determining sustainability will be the capacity to deliver a stable democracy. This inevitably opens up a world of debate over how to define the terms democracy and stability. Consociational democracy is already distinctly different from what
we might recognise as ‘democracy’ in Britain; that is, the majoritarian Westminster model. As Lijphart states, both systems accept that ‘majority rule is better than minority rule, but... instead of being satisfied with narrow decision-making majorities, [consociationalism] seeks to maximise the size of these majorities’ (1999, p.2). For the purpose of this essay, we can use Dahl’s definition of democracy, summarised as ‘not only free, fair, and competitive elections, but also the freedoms that make them truly meaningful (such as freedom of organisation and freedom of expression), alternative sources of information, and institutions to ensure that government policies depend on the votes and preferences of citizens’ (Dahl 1971). The term ‘stable’ in this instance will denote not only absence of conflict, but national cohesion, the ability of the government to carry out its daily functioning and to exercise territorial sovereignty. This essay essentially uses Lebanon as a case study for testing the normative claims of Lijphart’s theory of consociational democracy, which will be discussed at length in Chapter II. However, I will refrain from drawing wider conclusions concerning power-sharing models, and simply review the extent to which consociationalism achieves its stated aims in the specific case of Lebanon. A case study of the Syrian crisis will serve to draw attention to the influence of external factors in consociational failure. The method of inquiry employed here is thus qualitative, seeking to demonstrate the contrast between the ideal type and the reality as can be deduced from authoritative historical texts and critical analyses in the political science field. The literature used in this discussion was drawn from a wide variety of sources, from consociational literature, to history books, journal articles and news reports.

Looking initially to consociational theory, there is a plethora of literature available to us. While Lijphart is regarded as the father of consociational theory, prototype concepts existed as early as the seventeenth century, namely in the work of Johannes Althusius (Althusius 1997; Lijphart 2008, p.3). The term ‘consociational’ is also found in David Apter’s 1961...
study of Uganda and a concept similar to consociational democracy was outlined in Gerard Lembruch’s 1967 paper on ‘proportional democracy’ (Apter 1961; Lembruch 1967; Lijphart 2008, pp.3-4). Hudson (1997, p.104) traces the popularity of power-sharing arrangements back to Walker Connor’s 1972 article Nation-Building or Nation-Destroying? (1972; 1994). He argues that Connor challenged the idea dominant throughout the 1950s and 60s that religion and ethnicity were ‘primordial’ affiliations that would be subsumed into a universalist national identity through modernisation (Hudson 1997, p.104). This new focus on ethnicity and its implications for democracy was observed in the work of Donald Horowitz (1985) and Milton Esman (1994). Support for power-sharing arrangements can also be found outside the ‘consociational school’. Ted Gurr, for instance, states in Minorities at Risk: A Global View of Ethnopolitical Conflicts that ethnic minorities can only be protected in government ‘by some combination of the policies and institutions of autonomy and power sharing’ (1993, p.292). Consociational democracy has recently experienced a resurgence in popularity as a policy recommendation for post-conflict societies, consequently being adopted in Northern Ireland and Iraq. Key authors in this arena are Brendan O’Leary and John McGarry, whose revision of Lijphart’s conception of consociational democracy was influential in the Northern Ireland Peace Process (McGarry and O’Leary 2007). Consociational theorising has thus experienced a high degree of cross-over with the scholarship on state-building for post-conflict societies (Call and Wyeth 2008; Choudhry 2008; Jarstad and Sisk 2008; Norris 2008). Consociationalism, therefore, encompasses a broad church of theorists working from a variety of backgrounds.

As regards Lebanon specifically, the works of Cobban (1985) and more recently, Traboulsi (2007) both provide a detailed account of the origins of the modern Lebanese state. Taking a narrative approach, these authors trace the roots of sectarianism from the 16th Century to the
present day. Traboulsi in particular takes care to include the economic factors of conflicts that are too often painted as purely religious. An alternative to these may be Salibi’s *A House of Many Mansions: The History of Lebanon Reconsidered*, which seeks to debunk some of the foundational myths of each sect, such as the Maronites’ Phoenician heritage (1990). One of the limitations in researching this topic is the dearth of up-to-date material. As Traboulsi remarks, ‘The last civil war (1975-1990) was the occasion for a wealth of intellectual production on Lebanon in a variety of fields’, highlighting a gap in the scholarship in the post-Syrian withdrawal period, which the final chapters of his book fills in part. Tom Najem’s *Lebanon: The Politics of a Penetrated Society* (2012) is a significant addition in this area, as he surveys both the causes for the Civil War, the implications of the Taef Agreement and the political and economic situation in the wake of the Cedar Revolution. He posits that ‘the underlying conditions that led to the collapse of the political system in 1975 remain to this day’, a perspective that informs this study’s argument to a great extent (Najem 2012, p.122). Support for this viewpoint can be found in Choueiri’s *Breaking the Cycle: Civil Wars in Lebanon* (2007), a collection of contemporary essays that highlight the self-perpetuating, cyclical nature of sectarianism. Najem also places a great deal of emphasis on the role of external actors in creating conflict in Lebanon, which becomes particularly pertinent in this essay’s discussion of the Syrian crisis. This factor is largely ignored by consociational theorists, but was aptly highlighted in Brenda Seaver’s article *The Regional Sources of Power-Sharing Failure: The Case of Lebanon* (2000).

Seaver’s work also serves to bridge the gap between historians whose expertise lies in Lebanon and the field of comparative politics whose principal theorists tend to discuss consociational democracy either with a high degree of generalisation or with little mention of the Lebanese case. For instance, Stefan Wolff’s comprehensive review of power-sharing
literature does not once refer to Lebanon, revealing the shift in scholarly attention towards states such as Cyprus, Iraq, Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina (2010). An important exception to this is Richard Hrair Dekmejian’s 1978 article *Consociational Democracy in Crisis: The Case of Lebanon*. In this paper, Dekmejian critically analyses Lebanon’s failure to live up to consociational norms in the years preceding the Civil War. He emphasizes the stratified nature of Lebanese society, inaccurate representation and circumscribed state power, all factors as significant today as they were in 1978. A key argument that constitutes this study is that consociationalism is ‘the culprit of [Lebanon’s] instability, not the solution’ (Makdisi and Marktanner 2009, p.1), an opinion shared by the overwhelming majority of scholars in this area. Dekmejian, however, depicts the Lebanese case from the inverse perspective; He argues that Lebanon’s failure stems from its deviation from the ideal model, rather than from measures taken to emulate the model. As will become evident throughout this essay, subsequent authors have been able to confidently discard this claim, perhaps due to the clarity of hindsight. An influential factor in this study is the work of Imad Salamey and his some-time partner Rhys Payne. Salamey’s notion of ‘the spatial dilemma’ which postulates that ‘the sectarian struggle over spatial positioning has pitted different sects in competition with one another over vital locations throughout the country’ is a significant and novel contribution to the field (2009 p.92). Further to this, Salamey and Payne’s 2008 article *Parliamentary Consociationalism in Lebanon: Equal Citizenry vs. Quotated Confessionalism* reveals the deficiencies in the ‘quotated’ parliamentary system and proposes reforms for strengthening Lebanon’s institutions as a transition towards full democracy. In the literature on reforms, there is a trend towards encouraging bicameralism and a mixed electoral system, an idea crystallised in Salamey’s notion of ‘integrative consociationalism’ (2009).
As the Syrian crisis is ongoing, there is little critical literature discussing its relationship to confessionalism specifically. However, a number of think tanks have released policy briefs on the anticipated impact of the Syrian uprising on security in Lebanon, namely the European Council on Foreign Relations (Barnes-Dacey 2012) and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (Salem 2012). These aid the research by implicitly demonstrating the way in which Lebanon’s precarious confessional balance can be easily thrown into disarray by regional conflicts. They also highlight the role that geography and demographic dynamics play in power relations within the state. These papers are supplemented by news reports, which serve to keep this study as up-to-date as possible. Another useful source employed in the analysis in Chapter III is Al Jazeera’s 2009 documentary Lebanon: the Family Business, which provides important insights into the party system through interviews with key leaders (Al Jazeera English 2009).

I. Why did confessionalism develop?

In an international system that values a universalist vision of citizenship, it may be difficult to understand a political model that is essentially founded on the prevalence of difference over unity. As David Hirst states, ‘Lebanon is the sectarian state par excellence’ (2010, p.2). Having only gained independence in 1943, Lebanon is a relatively modern state. Yet its founders chose a political system that reinforced primordial ties of confession and kinship, rather than evoking any kind of over-arching sense of nationhood. This begs the question, what is so special about Lebanon that it developed such a system?

In order to answer this question, it may first be useful to consider the country’s demographic composition. The Lebanese state is small, encompassing just four million people in a territory of 4,035 square miles (in addition to a Palestinian refugee population of 300,000 and approximately 400,000 displaced Syrians) (Najem 2012, p.1; United Nations High
Commissioner for Refugees, hereafter UNHCR 2013). With regards to ethnicity, the CIA World Factbook identifies 95% of Lebanese as ‘Arab’, four percent as ‘Armenian’, and one percent as ‘Other’, most of whom are Kurds (Central Intelligence Agency 2013). However, religion is essentially the ‘ethnic’ identifier in Lebanon, where there are eighteen officially recognised confessional groups: Alawite, Armenian Catholic, Armenian Orthodox, Assyrian Church of the East, Chaldean Catholic, Copts, Druze, Greek Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Isma’ili, Jewish, Latin Catholic, Maronite, Protestant, Sunni, Shi’a, Syriac Catholic and Syriac Orthodox. However, not one of these groups constitutes a majority. Although a national census has not been conducted since 1932, a 2010 study carried out by Statistics Lebanon estimates that the Sunni and Shiite Muslim sects each account for 27 percent of the population (UNHCR 2011). 21 percent of Lebanese citizens are Maronite Christian, five percent Greek Orthodox, five percent Druze and five percent Greek Catholic, with smaller Christian denominations making up the final seven percent (UNHCR 2011). In addition to this, there are very small numbers of Jews, Baha'is, Buddhists, Hindus, and Mormons (UNHCR 2011). Lebanon has long served as a refuge for persecuted minorities from neighbouring states, including Kurds, Shiite Muslims, and Chaldeans from Iraq, and Coptic Christians from Egypt and Sudan. Approximately 10,000 Iraqi Christians and 3,000 to 4,000 Coptic Christians have taken refuge in Lebanon (UNHCR 2011). The following maps reveal the unique position in which Lebanon finds itself in relation to its neighbours. Map 1 details the religious make-up of the entire Middle East, while Map 2 focuses specifically on Lebanon. Map 3 depicts the confessional distribution of Beirut, which is home to nearly half of Lebanon’s total population. Sunnis are mostly concentrated in urban areas: North-West Beirut, Tripoli and Sidon. They also populate West Bekaa, Ikleem al Kharoub and Akkar. Shiites, on the other hand, dominate almost all of rural Southern Lebanon. They are also very populous in the Baalback and Hermel regions, and South-Western Beirut. Christians stretch
all over the Western part of the country, parts of Mount Lebanon, Bekaa, Jezzine and the Eastern half of Beirut. The Druze are mostly confined to the southern section of Mount Lebanon and the Hasbayah region in the South. Describing a trip to Beirut, Dedeyan illustrates Lebanon’s ‘pronounced geographical sectarianism’ in the following anecdote:

‘Locals who became instant friends took me to tour Beirut and its surrounding attractions. “This is Jounieh,” they would comment. “It’s all Maronites here.” Then in the surrounding hill-country... “Oh, Beittdine? That’s Druze...Here we are in Zahle – Catholic.” Similarly, I would peer from my hosts’ balcony overlooking Beirut: “See?” They would explain, “To the South is the airport, that’s mostly a Shiite neighbourhood”.

(Dedeyan 2005)

Lebanon thus presents a special case in the Muslim-majority Middle East. While Muslims as a whole do in fact dominate the Lebanese population, they by no means represent a homogenous group, as is evident in recent Sunni-Shia tensions. While few, if any, states are religiously or ethnically homogenous, Lebanon is special in that it is made up entirely of minorities. This case is thus inherently different to the challenge faced by many Western states as to whether minority groups should assimilate into the majority culture. Rather, the question at hand is how to balance the interests of a myriad of indigenous communities without one causing detriment to another. Such a diversity of denominations, coupled with a ‘crossroads culture’ of migratory flows have ‘created a unique heritage at once undeniably part of and yet just as undeniably distinct from the surrounding area’ (Haddad 1985, p.6).

Indeed, Lebanon has been described as the place where ‘East meets West’, influenced by both European Christian and Arab Muslim culture. Thus, at the moment of Independence in 1943, Lebanon faced a unique challenge. In the preceding years, debate had raged across the Levant concerning the true nature of Lebanese identity. While Christians on the whole
envisaged an independent Lebanon with a Christian character and economic and cultural ties to the West, Muslims had generally argued for integration into a larger pan-Arab state (Najem 2012, p.12). The National Pact was essentially an informal agreement on both sides to abandon these aspirations and adopt a ‘neutral’ foreign policy (Najem 2012, p.12). The pact was a watershed moment in Lebanese history, marking ‘the first occasion when the leaders of the two most powerful sects [Maronite and Sunni at the time]...were able to arrive at a mutually acceptable vision of Lebanon’s nationhood’ (Najem 2012, p.12). However, rather than discarding confessional concerns altogether, the state founders sought to create a Lebanon where Christians and Muslims would receive more or less equitable representation. This would not be obtained through universalist notions of ‘colour-blind’ or rather ‘religion-blind’ citizenship, but through a recognition that the sect had for years served as the primary channel of political rights.

To summarise, Lebanon poses a unique dilemma to policy-makers and democracy engineers. While most of its neighbours are made up of clear Sunni or Shia majorities, Lebanon is essentially a mosaic of minorities. With the roots of sectarianism driven so deep into Lebanese soil, it seems difficult to conceive of a political system that does not take religion into account. In the following chapter, we will review the theoretical basis for consociational democracy as a solution to this problem.

II. What does consociational democracy have to offer divided societies?

Confessionalism is one form of consociationalism, a power-sharing arrangement defined as ‘government by elite cartel designed to turn a democracy with a fragmented political culture into a stable democracy’ (Lijphart 1969). Consociational theory was primarily devised in the
late 1960s by Dutch political scientist Arend Lijphart (1984), who identified the following four components of consociational democracies:

1. Proportional representation of sects in official postings

2. A grand coalition of sectarian elites

3. Autonomy of each community to regulate its own customs such as personal status laws

4. Mutual veto power between group leaders

(Direct quote, Harb 2006)

All four elements are present in Lebanon. Lijphart first observed consociational structures in his home country, as well as Belgium, Austria and Switzerland. Noting that the Netherlands was paradoxically deeply segmented, yet stable and democratic, Lijphart developed a theoretical system that could be applied elsewhere (Lijphart 1968, pp.1-2). Thus, what began as an explanatory theory soon became a normative model for power-sharing (Andeweg 2000, p.516; Bogaards 2000, p.396).

The central dilemma facing plural societies today is how to accommodate a diverse body of people within the same state. Hudson aptly describes this challenge in the following statement:

‘Westminster-style majoritarian liberal democracy, with its insistence on the individual as the fundamental unit of political analysis, seemed to some to miss the point of ‘lumpy’ ethnic communal units...[whereas] ‘national projects’ whose raison d’être was to try and erase
ethnosectarian particularities in favor of a fusion model of national identity also seemed increasingly unable to handle “subnational” cleavages’ (1997, p.104).

Some governments have responded to this by adopting the ‘melting-pot’ approach, espousing cultural assimilation and a homogenous national identity (Salamey 2009, p.85). Others have taken on multiculturalism in the hope of preserving both cultural diversity and social cohesion (McGarry and O’Leary 2007; Lijphart 1969). Lijphart’s thesis, however, rejects such models. Consociational democracy is instead underpinned by the idea prevalent in pluralist theory that social cleavages are conducive to conflict if they are ‘mutually reinforcing’, but are lessened if alliances are ‘cross-cutting’ (Daalder 1974, pp.606-7; Dekmekjian 1978, p.252). Mutually reinforcing cleavages occur where two or more categories – such as race, religion, class or political affiliation - divide society along the same lines. For example, in a state marked by a clear Hindu/Muslim divide, if the Hindus largely constituted the lower class population, and the Muslims the higher class population, these two societal divides are said to reinforce each other. Cross-cutting cleavages, however, arise when individuals are allied to more than one group depending on the category. Majoritarian systems are considered appropriate only when these cross-cutting memberships occur naturally, as opposed to ‘plural’ societies such as Lebanon, which are ‘sharply divided along religious, ideological, linguistic, cultural, ethnic, or racial lines with their own political parties, interest groups, and media and communication’ (Lijphart 1984, p.22). More succinctly, Dahl describes plural societies as those in which there is ‘a plurality of relatively autonomous subsystems or segments’ within the same state (Dahl 1982, p.5). Larry Diamond echoes this notion that an alternative to the majoritarian system is necessary in deeply divided states in the following statement:
‘If any generalization about institutional design is sustainable...it is that majoritarian systems are ill-advised for countries with deep ethnic, regional, religious, or other emotional and polarizing divisions. Where cleavage groups are sharply defined and group identities (and intergroup insecurities and suspicions) deeply felt, the overriding imperative is to avoid broad and indefinite exclusion from power of any significant group.’ (Diamond 1999, p.104).

The task of the elite cartel is thus to foster multiple memberships, in order to ‘create cross-pressures’ which would in turn minimise the potential for inter-group conflict (Lijphart 1980, pp.3-4). Lijphart outlines the role of the elite in a consociational democracy in the following precepts:

1. Elites have the ability to accommodate the interests and demands of subgroups.
2. Elites have the ability to bypass cleavages and to coordinate with other elites representing rival sub-groups.
3. Elites should be committed to the maintenance of the system.
4. Elites should be aware of the impacts of political fragmentation.

(Direct quote, Lijphart 1969, p.217)

In the consociational state, political deliberation is to be conducted through a national unity government in a ‘spirit of accommodation’, meaning ‘the settlement of divisive issues and conflicts, where only a minimal consensus exists’ (Lijphart 1968, p.103). Indeed, Lijphart defines the entire consociational model as ‘a democratic regime that emphasises consensus instead of opposition, that includes rather than excludes’ and that seeks the largest possible majority rule rather than settling for a ‘bare majority’ (Lijphart 1999, p.2). In contrast to the adversarial style of Anglo-American political culture, consociational democracy seeks to
effect a culture of compromise. To this end, Lebanon has adopted unicameralism in addition to the aforementioned core consociational structures. The Lebanese system has been described as ‘corporate consociationalism’, which denotes a society in which the allocation of influential positions does not stop at the government but occurs throughout all state institutions (Salamey 2009, p.85).

Consociationalism has been a controversial theory since its inception. Andeweg maintains that its critics tend to find fault not in the validity of consociational democracy as a whole but in small and varied areas of Lijphart’s works (2000, p.517). Some contest the classification of certain states as consociational, or argue that the Netherlands was not as severely segmented as purported by Lijphart in his original thesis (Andeweg 2000, p.517). Barry (1975) in particular calls into question whether Lijphart’s ‘classic cases’ of consociational democracy could in fact be regarded as such. Others bemoan the dearth of conceptual precision over certain key concepts and the absence of a scientific method for testing them (Van Schendelen 1985, pp.154-5). With regard to Lijphart’s method, Lustick (1979) criticises his ‘impressionistic methodological posture, flexible rules for coding data, and an indefatigable, rhetorically seductive commitment to promoting consociationalism as a widely applicable principle of political engineering’. Moreover, Lijphart offers little reflection on the exact meaning of central terms such as cleavage or elite cartel, and sometimes conflates consociational democracy with similar typologies of his own, namely ‘consensus democracy’. These issues, however, concern consociational theory only as an observational tool, debating the semantics of terminology or questioning whether certain states can in fact be grouped together. This essay, in contrast, seeks to move from the abstract to concrete, and assess the success of consociational democracy as a normative model of government for
divided societies. Simply put, does consociationalism provide Lebanon with a stable democracy?

The irony of this question is that Lijphart’s theory was developed well after confessional structures were already established in Lebanon. Unlike other modern cases, Lebanese consociationalism did not arise out of artificial institutional engineering in a post-conflict situation. These structures were present before and after both Independence and Civil War. In fact, many cite the inequalities present in the confessional system as a contributing factor to the Civil War, and the conflict was brought to an end in 1989 on the very basis that it would soon be replaced by a more sustainable system. However, the approach taken under the Taef Agreement was merely to alter the balance of power-sharing, reducing the role of the President and enhancing the representation of Muslims to better reflect their share of the population. The root causes of the failure of the confessional system were never tackled. Choueiri highlights this concern, noting that between 1861 and 1989, each time civilian strife erupted in Lebanon fighting was triggered and concluded in precisely the same set of conditions. These included:

1. The absence of an adequate political formula
2. The emergence of a new sectarian configuration demanding representation
3. The imposition of a new settlement by outside forces, or through their mediation
4. No Lebanese civil war has so far come to an end as a result of direct and unmediated negotiations by the parties concerned.

(Direct quote, Choueiri 2007, p.21)
He describes Lebanon as being caught in a continuous cycle of violence perpetuated by the very measures that are intended to prevent it. In align with this, Beydoun asserts that the causes of violence in Lebanon are found not in previous conflicts but in the peace agreements that brought them to an end (Beydoun 2007, p.15). He goes on to argue that war was repeatedly waged between the sects because it was the only available method of ‘renewing their internal structures and their relationship with other stakeholders’ (Beydoun 2007, p.15). Salamey echoes this critique of the various new settlements, arguing that they are merely short-term measures that have neither aided the project of accommodation nor moderated sectarianism (Salamey 2009, p.84).

In summary, consociational theory rests upon the assumption that deeply divided societies can remain stable through a system of power-sharing between community leaders. While some criticism has been made concerning the consistency and coherence of Lijphart’s theoretical framework, the focus for the remainder of the essay will be to determine whether this assumption is valid in practice in the case of Lebanon.

III. Does the confessional system provide a stable democracy?

As Wadi Haddad aptly notes, ‘A remarkable aspect of the problems in Lebanon is the difficulty in delimiting them’ (1985, p.3). Indeed, the deficiencies of confessionalism are complex and overlapping; this is not simply a case of cause-and-effect. The enigma of the confessional system is that it is simultaneously self-destructive and self-perpetuating. Nevertheless, this chapter aims to present a systematic critical analysis of confessionalism.
i. **Sectarian Representation and the Party System**

The hallmark of confessionalism is the distribution of political posts according to religious affiliation. Positions in both the Cabinet and Parliament are divided equally between Christians and Muslims. Parliament is comprised of 128 members elected from 26 multi-member constituencies, known as *qadaa*. The eighteen religious groups are represented in the legislative body in the following eleven categories: Sunni, Shia, Druze, Alawite, Maronite, Greek Orthodox, Greek Catholic, Armenian Orthodox, Armenian Catholic, Evangelical and Christian Minorities. While representatives are elected by universal suffrage, only candidates from pre-determined confessions can stand in a certain constituency. As electoral districts encompass a diverse body of people, an individual does not necessarily vote for a candidate of his or her own religious group. For example, an Armenian Orthodox living in the Nabatieh district, which is made up of three Shiite seats, can only choose between Shiite candidates. This is to ensure that each Deputy does not merely pursue sectarian interests but appeals to a wide cross-section of their constituency. The strength of this system is that even the smallest of minorities gain a degree of representation, instead of being subsumed into a generic mass, as can occur in a traditional majoritarian system. However, while this model managed to stave off conflict in the short term, it also ‘institutionalised incentives and structures that were detrimental to political development.’ (Salamey and Payne 2008, p.464). Firstly, there is little competition within communities for representative positions, as incumbent elites play on the fear of domination by other sects in order to solidify their status as ‘defenders of their groups’ (Salamey and Payne 2008, p.464). Secondly, there is the issue of districting, which has for decades been open to abuse by those in power. Districts are frequently and repeatedly gerrymandered according to the whims of the Ministry of the Interior, depending on the political alliances of the moment, in order to secure support in certain areas (Ekmekji 2012, p.7). For instance, the districting of predominantly Muslim areas in ‘Beirut, Mount Lebanon,
Zahle in the Beqaa, Marjeyoun in the South, and Bsharre in the North has a decisive influence on the outcome of the Christian polls’ (Ekmekji 2012, p.7).

Furthermore, detractors of the confessional system maintain that it does not in fact mirror the country’s demographic composition, which has been a constant bone of contention throughout Lebanese history. Attempts to redress the confessional imbalance in government have been hampered by the fact that a national census has not been conducted since 1932, which saw a Muslim: Christian ratio of 5:6 established in the 1943 National Pact. Since this time, the proportion of Christians has decreased significantly due to emigration, the high Muslim birth rate and the influx of Muslim immigrants from Syria and Palestine. Yet the official 1943 distribution remained, which Salamey states ‘repeatedly plunged the country into national crises and, often, violent confrontations as a sole mean to adjust sectarian power distribution’ (Salamey 2009, p.87). In the build up to the 1975-1990 Civil War, calls to reform the distributive formula were blocked by Christians who feared loss of power. The Civil War was brought to an end through the Taef Agreement in 1989, which reconfigured the representative model to grant Christians and Muslims equal influence in Parliament. While this reform marked a step in the right direction, the Agreement did not put in place a legal mechanism that would account for future population changes and the government is yet again in the position of defending an outdated model. Table 1 (Salamey and Payne 2008, p.457) details the confessional make-up of the legislature as of 2005. Note that Christians account for only 41.08% of registered voters and yet hold 50% of the seats, while Muslims make up 58.92% of the voting population yet also hold 50% of the seats. However, Christians have also complained that the practice of having large constituencies meant that most of their Deputies were in fact elected through Muslim votes, rendering it an ‘artificial equality’ (Ekmekji 2012, p7).
Part and parcel of this issue is the weakness of ideological parties. Although there are some parties that are motivated purely by ideology such as communist or Arab nationalist groups, without integration into the confessional framework they are marginalised and fail to gain any real influence (Najem 2012, p.17). In fact, the party system in general has traditionally been rather weak. The role of parties has never been defined in Lebanese law, neither by the 1926 Constitution, nor the National Pact of 1943, nor the Taef Agreement in 1989. The confessional nature of politics has until recently rendered political parties, as they are understood in the West, irrelevant (Sensenig-Dabbous 2009). Leaders have typically depended on familial and sectarian loyalties, as well as election-rigging and other corrupt practices, in order to secure votes rather than a comprehensive manifesto or policy platform (Sensenig-Dabbous 2009). The electorate tend to relate directly to their respective Deputies rather than a party and individual candidates have a tendency to form alliances on an ad hoc basis (Sensenig-Dabbous 2009).

However, since the events of 2005, the party system in Lebanon has begun to take on Western-style structures (Sensenig-Dabbous 2009). In February 2005, Sunni Prime Minister Rafic Hariri was assassinated in central Beirut, allegedly at the hands of Hezbollah. The following month, Syria bowed to pressure from both the international community and domestic actors and concluded its thirty-year military presence in the Lebanese Republic. Out of the so-called ‘Cedar Revolution’ of Spring 2005 emerged a Lebanon split in two. On one side lies the incumbent March 8 Alliance, a predominantly Shia pro-Syrian/Iranian movement comprised of Hezbollah, the Shiite majority Amal Party, the Free Patriotic Movement (lead by Michel Aoun) and the Armenian Revolutionary Federation, among others (Ekmekji 2012, p.5). On the other we find March 14, a diverse alliance of groups seeking to assert Lebanese sovereignty as independent from Syria and usher in democratic reform. This coalition encompasses former Prime Minister Saad Hariri and his Future Movement, other Sunni...
groups (including Islamic fundamentalists), Christian Lebanese Forces headed by Samir Geagea, former President and Maronite leader Amin Gemayel, the democratic Armenian Ramgavar Party, social democrats Hnchak, and several Christian minority parties (Ekmekji 2012, p.5). The Druze-dominated Progressive Socialist party initially aligned itself with March 14 but defected to March 8 in January 2011. Likewise, the Maronite-oriented Free Patriotic Movement shifted to March 8 from March 14 after it became obvious that its leaders would not support Michel Aoun as a presidential candidate (Najem 2012, p.74). These two defections contributed greatly to Saad Hariri’s downfall and March 8’s subsequent succession to government in June 2011 (Ekmekji 2012, p.5).

Although generally defined by a Sunni-Shia divide (with Christian actors forming the minority on each side), this marks an increased consideration of ideological aims within the political framework. While both camps claim clear policy on domestic issues - March 14 espouses free market principles and March 8 champions anti-corruption – the sharpest distinction between the two is their foreign policy ideals (Sensenig-Dabbous 2009). It also demonstrates the willingness of confessional elites to work with other sectarian groups on national issues. March 14 represents a large, religiously diverse portion of Lebanese society who want to see Lebanon’s national sovereignty respected by its neighbours. Nevertheless, there are evidently confessional interests at play here. The issue of Syrian influence is not merely a question of territorial integrity: Shia-majority Syria has favoured the Shiite communities in Lebanon while marginalising minorities, especially Maronite Christians (Najem 2012, p.73). Sunni Lebanese also demonstrate a great deal of resentment towards Syria due to the assassination of their leader Hariri, as do the Druze, who even before 2005 criticised Syrian heavy-handedness in internal affairs (Najem 2012, p.73). Pro/anti-Syria or Shia/Sunni hostilities have once again worsened following the assassination of leading Sunni figure and head of the Lebanese Internal Security Forces General Wissam al-Hassan on 19th
October 2012. Saad Hariri has since accused Syrian President Bashar al-Assad of orchestrating the murder.

ii. The Elite Cartel and Clientelism

Another important aspect of Lebanon’s confessional structure is the role of sectarian leaders. In alignment with Lijphart’s notion of the ‘grand coalition of elites’, Lebanese political culture is highly stratified, with those at the top considered the mouthpiece of their individual community. The grand coalition is embodied in the Cabinet, which comprises 30 members: six Maronites, four Greek Orthodox, three Greek Catholic, two Armenian Orthodox, seven Sunni, five Shiite and three Druze. Richard Dekmejian defines the ‘elite cartel’ as ‘a comprehensive coalition of elites, representative of the segments of society (subcultures and special interests) and committed to the preservation of the existing system’ (Dekmejian 1978, p.253). This last facet is particularly telling and may explain the perpetual endurance of the confessional system: those who have the power to change it are also those who are most invested in its existence. The coalition of elites finds its roots in the Ottoman period. Ruling over an empire that was incredibly ethnically and religiously diverse, the Ottomans came to depend on local feudal elites and communally entrenched dynasties to control the area (Najem 2012, p.5). These political bosses, known as zu’ama, used their status and authority to provide protection and patronage (Najem 2012, pp.16-17). Some of these same dynasties constitute Lebanon’s sectarian elite to this day, such as the Jumblatt family, whose descendent Walid Jumblatt is the leader of the Druze-majority Progressive Socialist Party. When the National Pact was signed in 1943, these sectarian elites naturally took up the mantle of national leadership. Political bosses bargained intensely for resources and positions for their communities. This period of negotiation was described by Michael Young as
‘splitting up the Lebanese pie’ (Young quoted in Najem 2012, p.17). Pre-statehood confessional divides were exacerbated by this new and intense competition at the very height of the political structure. This was not merely a political phenomenon: confessionalism pervades every aspect of daily life. Jobs, housing and education were not guaranteed by the state but by the ministers that represented each community, who in turn were elected through sectarian laws (Makdisi 1996, p.25). A similar scramble for power occurred in the post-Civil War reconstruction period. This introduced a cycle of patronage whereby citizens would depend on their communal leaders for opportunities and services that in other countries would be provided by the state. This practice, known as clientelism, thrived in the post-Independence era, as the elites were forced to strengthen ties with their clientele in order to win elections and be appointed ministers (Hamzeh 2001, p.171).

As the Lebanese state eroded during the Civil War, this power vacuum gave birth to a new and repressive form of clientelism: militias. These militias, including Hezbollah, Amal, Murabitun and the Maronite Lebanese Forces, used coercion and military force in order to acquire government funds (Hamzeh 2001, p.174). They took over the role of the state, with some militias even owning their own ports, airport, services, taxes, and taxation systems (Gebara 2007, p.9). Hezbollah in particular carved out a role for itself as a provider of welfare services (Knudsen 2005, p.4). Traboulsi describes Lebanon after 1983 as country made up of ‘seventeen sects, a dozen cantons, some twenty (illegal) ports and dozens of armed organizations’ (Traboulsi 2007, p.228). The elites purposefully prevented the establishment of a strong state, well aware that it would curb their own traditional realms of influence and capacity to provide patronage to their communities (Najem 2012, p.31). This was most keenly observed in the Franjeh government, who effectively blocked proposals made by the Chehabists that would serve to strengthen the state (Najem 2012, p.31).
When the Civil War came to an end, sovereignty was returned to the state to a large extent and every militia except for Hezbollah was disarmed (Gebara 2007, p.9). However, given the control the militia warlords exercised over their own constituencies, it was deemed important to incorporate them into the post-conflict reconstruction process (Gebara 2007, p.10). Thus, those responsible for much of the fighting were granted amnesty in return for ensuring stability within their sects, and maintained privileged positions in the post-war leadership (Gebara 2007, p.10). Between 1989 and 2003, ex-warlords held 39 positions in the Cabinet, making up 22% of the core posts (Gebara 2007, p.10). The fragmentation of Lebanon into ‘mini-states’ during the civil war and the legitimisation of the ex-warlords once fighting had ceased strained the state’s relationship with the citizen (Gebara 2001, p.11). As a consequence, the government soon became ‘the agent of individual and sectarian financial interests’, lacking accountability to its citizenry (Gebara 2001, p.11). Haddad notes that this resulted in political alienation among the Lebanese people, which in turn limited the state’s power to act autonomously (Haddad 2009, p.405; see also Knudson 2005, p.4). In this way, both the state and the citizen’s relationship to the state were severely weakened. This system stifles any ‘universalistic’ notion, discouraging the citizen from participating in their own government (Hamzeh 2001, p.176). Today, Hamzeh argues that, despite the arrival of a relatively modern Lebanon, clientelism has not died away but has instead ‘been found to crystallize in a great variety of forms’ (2001, p.167).

As a result of these clientelistic networks, Lebanon has experienced ‘a self-perpetuating capture of the state’ by the confessional elite, whose lack of accountability undermines their supposed ‘commitment to the public good’ (Salamey 2009, p.84). The focus on family and sect in political life has meant that candidates effectively inherit positions from their forefathers. Consociational democracy thus fails to deliver a true democratic state as
traditional channels of democracy, such as voting for one’s representative, are hampered at every turn by kinship issues rather than national ones. Elite networks have been facilitated by the plurality list-based majority system in which incumbent leaders bargain between themselves, trading votes across sectarian lines ‘without necessarily soliciting votes from their own social grouping’ (Salamey 2009, p.84). Focusing more on expanding their personal influence, the elites ignore pressing issues such as economic reform, accountability and the rule of law (Salamey and Payne, 2008).

Critiquing consociational theory more generally, Andeweg maintains that deep social cleavages are not in fact ‘pre-existing social realities’ but rather small divisions that have been purposefully exacerbated by the elite (2000, p.519). In line with this, Horowitz asserts that ‘the very act of forming a multiethnic coalition generates intraethnic competition – flanking – if it does not already exist’ (1985, p.575). It is ironic, then, that the elites ‘on whose prudence consociationalism relies to mitigate the destabilizing effects of segmentation’ are the very people responsible for their creation (Andeweg 2000, p.519). While it cannot be argued that differences in Lebanon are entirely constructed, it is clear to see that – at the very least - they have not been moderated by the consociational model. Salamey and Payne go as far as to state that sectarian leaders ‘play on jealousies’ between groups in order to prevent the emergence of a strong secular movement which would threaten ‘their oligopolistic control of the public purse’ (Salamey and Payne 2008, p.456). Hamzeh echoes this argument, asserting that even in its modern, party-oriented form, ‘The participation of the individual has remained vertical and fragmented rather than horizontal’ (Hamzeh 2001, p.176). As a result, Lebanese civil society is weak and frequently ‘conflated with communal society’ as the overwhelming majority of third sector groups are affiliated to a particular sect rather than any kind of secular social movement (Moufarrege 2009).
Communal Autonomy, Identity and Civil Liberties

Another defining component of Lebanese confessionalism is communal autonomy. Stemming from the Ottoman ‘millet system’, this custom effectively granted each sect legal autonomy over cultural practices such as marriage, inheritance and education, allowing the cultural and political identity of each community to flourish within wider borders (Najem 2012, p.5). This system was later written into the 1926 Constitution. Due to the complexity of reconciling the customs of many different communities to a single legal system, the authorities formally gave each sect power over civil issues such as family law while retaining a French-style secular judicial system for criminal matters (Najem 2012, p.9). It is therefore in the hands of each group to ‘conceive their [own] legal order’, while the state acts simply as a ‘framework to enforce the rule of the religious groups’ (Moufarrege 2009). As a result, there is no concept of citizenship outside of one’s religious community (Moufarrege 2009). National identity is thus unfeasibly weak. Obeid encapsulates this sentiment in the following statement:

‘In Lebanon, you are never simply Lebanese. You are Sunni from Beirut, Maronite Catholic from Jounieh, or Shia from the South. Whether seeking to marry or applying for a job, the first question is always what ‘confession,’ or religious sect, you belong to.’

(Obeid 2010)

In this way, the confessional system is self-perpetuating. Its all-consuming reach into the very minutiae of daily life reinforces sectarian divides and discourages the development of a unified national identity. Citizens are thus unable to conceive of interests outside of their communal remit and political movements tend to focus solely on redressing power imbalances. As representation is so closely tied to resource distribution, this system ‘actually encourages an inter-faith conflict with high stakes: perceived survival’ (Dedeyan 2005). As Rigby notes, given the large degree of communal autonomy over daily life, confessional
politics offer ‘no shared sense of what it is to be Lebanese’ (2000, pp.169-80). Karim Paqradouni, former head of the Phalange party, maintains that the Lebanese suffer from a failure to see the bigger picture: ‘The first loyalty is to the sect and the sect draws you to the family not to the nation, which means the sects always draw you to what is smaller, not what is larger’ (Paqradouni, Al Jazeera English interview, 31st May 2009). Others point to historical factors, stating that Lebanon’s borders were drawn up artificially by the French who wished to establish a Christian-dominated nation in the Middle East. Ziad Rihbani satirises the illogic inherent in confessional democracy in the following summary of the supposed Lebanese nation-state:

‘One Lebanese nation divided into two equal parts, which in turn are divided into three, more or less, equal parts, supplemented by a row of equally un-subtractable parts of the One Lebanese People, who in turn are divided equally on un-relinquishable regions of the One Lebanese Land’ (Quoted in Ziadeh 2006, p.143).

Indeed, it appears impossible to achieve cohesion in a system that constantly divides and subdivides its people into separate and discrete categories. Lijphart’s hypothesis that consociational democracy can create ‘cross-cutting cleavages’ is therefore proved false in the case of Lebanon. The confessional system in fact achieves the exact opposite, freezing cleavages in place, or in some instances driving them further apart.

Aside from questions of cohesion or stability, communal autonomy poses serious problems for Lebanon’s progression to a fully-fledged democracy. As citizenship is effectively provided by the sect and not the state, those outside the sectarian framework are severely lacking in civil rights. For instance, citizens wishing to marry cannot do so in a civil ceremony, forcing the non-religious, couples of different religions and followers of religions
not recognised by the state to conduct their marriages abroad. This has led to calls for the creation of a so-called ‘nineteenth sect’ in parliament for secular citizens. Similar problems occur in relation to issues of parental rights, death, burial and inheritance. Saadawi maintains that it is ‘essentially meaningless to cohabitate as communities’ – as the Lebanese authorities frequently purport to encourage – if citizens living in the same state cannot even intermarry (Saadawi 2013). Indeed, what we observe in Lebanon is not peaceful co-existence between an equal but culturally heterogeneous citizenry, but rather ‘a collection of de facto ministates’ living in parallel versions of their own ‘Lebanon’ (Choucair 2006, p.3). However, it was reported on 18th January 2013 that Lebanese couple Nidal Darwish and Kholoud Sukkariyah had successfully sought a civil marriage (YaLibnan 2013). The marriage contract was initially signed in November 2012 after the couple removed their religious affiliation from their ID cards in 2008, but the pair continues to face a number of legal challenges. While President Suleiman and Saad Hariri have since expressed their support for the marriage, it has yet to be approved by Minister of the Interior Marwan Charbel (Galey and Ensor 2013). Communal autonomy also hinders the rights of women, who, depending on their sect, often have ‘unequal access to divorce’ (Human Rights Watch 2012). In January of this year, the government rejected a bill that would allow women to pass their nationality on to non-Lebanese husbands and their offspring (Human Rights Watch 2012). Furthermore, the confessional legal framework is unable to provide basic rights to migrant workers, who are only permitted to work under the ‘sponsorship’ system. This requires a migrant to be tied to a single employer or ‘sponsor’ in order to stay in the country, leaving them vulnerable to abuse and unable to seek legal aid (Stoughton 2012).
iv. The Mutual Veto and Political Inertia

The last key feature of power-sharing identified by Lijphart is the mutual veto. This is integral to the functioning of the Lebanese Executive, which consists of a Sunni President, a Christian Prime Minister and a Shiite Speaker of the House. This tripartite structure, known as the troika, operates on a ‘confusion of powers’ whereby the competence of each role is not clearly defined and each player has the power to veto any legislation he or she wishes (Najem 2010, p.62). This principle is also manifest in the legislature, where opposition Members of Parliament are permitted to veto the position of the President. Mutual veto power was designed to ensure that one sect cannot exercise dominance over another, as all three leaders must reach a compromise in order to bring legislation into effect. However, this has resulted in frequent deadlocks and the use of extra-institutional leveraging. Dekmejian identified this pattern as early as 1978, writing, ‘Once in power, the top members of the elite cartel often use unconstitutional means to reduce their opposition to lessen its chances of achieving power’ (1978, p.255). Power relations in the Executive reached crisis point in 2006 when the Shiite cabinet ministers resigned under the direction of March 8 and Hezbollah. This mass resignation stripped the government of its legitimacy as it no could no longer be said to represent every community (Najem 2012, p.80). Hezbollah organised demonstrations and sit-ins, calling for the Siniora government to grant the Shiite community a third of cabinet seats. This reform would secure veto power for Shiites on future decisions. When the government refused, the deadlock escalated into an armed Hezbollah take-over of West Beirut and the country’s only airport, along with other strategic areas. After a two-year stand-off, the crisis was concluded at the signing of the Doha Accord in May 2008, which finally granted Hezbollah the veto. This was highly significant in that it allowed Hezbollah to obstruct both proposals for their disarmament and any decisions concerning the international tribunal on Hariri’s assassination (Najem 2012, p.80).
This dilemma reveals a significant deficiency in consociational theory: overconfidence in the elite cartel. Lijphart supposes that the elites will have the capacity to (a) moderate cleavages and (b) work in a ‘spirit of accommodation’ for the good of the nation. However, neither has proven correct, as confessional divisions remain and the Lebanese state is gripped by political stalemate. While Lijphart concedes early on in his writings that, ‘decision making that entails accommodation among all subcultures is a difficult process, and consociational democracies are always threatened by a degree of immobilism’ (1969, p.218), he fails to recognise that this immobility stems from consociational democracy itself. Furthermore, Van Schendelen highlights Lijphart’s failure to even conceive of potential competition between the elites, stating, ‘In spite of all the assumed conflicts in a plural society, competition at elite level is implicitly supposed not to exist and not to need any conceptualization’ (1985, p.158). It seems strange that the elites are presumed to be immune to division in a state so segmented at every other level. Surely competition between leaders is inevitable when the entire political system is based on the reinforcement of difference rather than unity. Van Schendelen again reveals this contradiction in Lijphart’s (1968) theoretical framework in the following statement:

‘On the one hand they [over-arching loyalties] are said to be strong enough to provide some basic and minimal consensus (“favorable condition”), but on the other hand Lijphart considers them to be so weak that the elites have to create real consensus’ (1985, p.164).

Immobilism looks set to remain in Lebanon following Najib Mikati’s resignation in March. After a ‘dangerous two-week power vacuum’, Tamam Salam was finally nominated Prime Minister with widespread support (British Broadcasting Corporation 2013). However, he now
faces the challenge of forming a new government that encompasses the whole political spectrum – a task which took his predecessor five months to complete.

To conclude this chapter, while confessional democracy was intended to encourage compromise and cohesion between the myriad denominations within Lebanon, it has instead driven the population further apart. Although the Lebanese have enjoyed many more freedoms than their neighbours (Makdisi and Marktanner 2009, p.12) and avoided the kind of autocratic rule that for years typified the Middle East, the confessional system has proven unable to provide a number of basic civil liberties to its citizens, stalling its progression to full democracy. Further to this, confessionalism has severely weakened the role of the state through its strengthening of clientelistic networks over national institutions, limiting its capacity to effect real change. To complement this analysis, we now turn to the situation in Syria. A study of confessionalism would be incomplete without consideration of external factors, and Lebanon’s response to the Syrian crisis provides the perfect litmus test for its long-term sustainability.

v. The Syrian Crisis

The ongoing crisis in Syria may have profound consequences for Lebanon. The Syrian civilian conflict, which has been raging since March 2011, has seen approximately 400,000 refugees pour into Lebanon, meaning it now follows closely behind Jordan as host of the largest number of displaced Syrians (UNHCR 2013). While only 280,000 had officially registered with the UN as of 11th April 2013, there are an estimated further 135,000 Syrians in Lebanon who have not yet sought UN aid (UNHCR 2013). These new migratory flows are expected to upset the precarious confessional balance within Lebanon, as divides between Sunni and Shiite Muslims worsen by the day. Headlines reveal increasing fears of a Syrian
spillover across the Lebanese border, amongst news of sectarian strife, border scuffles, targeted kidnappings and politically-calculated assassinations (Salem 2012, p.1). Alongside this, the entire Lebanese political framework appears to be under threat as the country becomes increasingly polarised between its pro- and anti-Assad components. Indeed, it is said that ‘Whenever it rains in Syria, the Lebanese have to open their umbrellas’ (Hashem 2013). This raises two questions: Why does a domestic conflict in one sovereign state have such great implications for the stability of another? And how does this relate to the confessional system?

Part of the problem is that Sunni-Shia relations in Syria mirror very closely that of Lebanon. Assad and his regime are part of the minority Alawite sect, a sub-group of Shia Islam, whereas the Syrian rebels are largely Sunni Muslims. Similarly, Sunnis in Lebanon feel increasingly marginalised due to the dominance of the Shiite, Syrian-backed Hezbollah bloc. Lebanese Sunnis who draw their sense of identity from the sect rather than the nation thus express a great deal of loyalty towards their Syrian co-religionists. This has been observed in instances of Lebanese Sunnis crossing the border into Syria to fight alongside the rebels, such as a group of thirteen young Tripoli residents who were found dead after travelling to Syria to join a militia linked to Fatah al-Islam (Malas and Fassihi 2013). As Ahmad al Qasqas, speaking on behalf of pan-Arabist Islamist party Hizb al-Tahrir, explains, ‘From the birth of the Lebanese state, Tripoli has resisted being a part of Lebanon...We have a true, Islamic link to Syria’ (Al Qasqas quoted in Malas and Fassihi 2013). Further to this, the assassinated Lebanese Internal Security Forces General Wissam al-Hassan allegedly shipped arms to Syrian rebels in the year preceding his death, sometimes using weapons from Lebanon’s own government stock (Malas and Fassihi 2013). These cases are not only an act of loyalty; Salem reminds us that Lebanese Sunnis viewed the Syrian uprising as ‘a chance to bring down a regional power that stood behind Hezbollah’s power in Lebanon’ (2012, p.5). Moreover,
Sunnis in Lebanon had been spurred on by the rise of predominantly Sunni populations against autocratic regimes in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, and Yemen (Salem 2012, p.5).

Where consociational theory falls flat in this area is that it offers minimal reflection on the meaning of religious identity, aside from being one of the many types of ‘cleavage’. Lijphart’s thesis fails to account for the transnational nature of religious and ethnic identity in our current age. Globalisation has ushered in an era of ‘deterritorialisation’ or ‘denationalisation’ (Anderson 2006; Castles and Davidson 2000; Gulalp 2006; Kerr 2005; Lake and Rothchild 1998), in which ‘the overwhelming interconnectedness of ethno-political factors [reach] out beyond the borders of the nation-state’ (Salamey 2009, p.86). This is particularly true of the Middle East, where religious conflict does not recognise sovereign borders and alliances are increasingly forged according to broader affiliations, be it Sunni versus Shia, Muslim versus Jew, pro-Sharia versus pro-secular. The Syrian conflict, therefore, is more than simply a civil war. It plays into wider Sunni-Shia rivalries throughout the Middle East. Lebanon in particular often finds itself at the centre of a precarious geo-political-religious balance that confessional democracy seems to exacerbate rather than moderate. Seaver echoes this concern, commenting that the task of building strong democracies in deeply segmented societies becomes further challenging in regions where communities with a shared sense of identity ‘transcend state boundaries’ (2000, p.248). The transnational nature of confessional communities poses a grave threat to Lebanon’s stability, as domestic issues could be transformed into ‘regional crises involving several states’ (Seaver 2000, p.248). In this way, the confessional system resembles a house of cards. It has the potential to function well when all the conditions are favourable and every group’s interests are perfectly balanced. However, at the slightest hint of regional tension, it collapses;
Theodor Hanf once noted that consociationalism was a ‘fair-weather model’ (Hanf quoted in Hudson 1992, p.237).

Looking more closely, the Syrian crisis reveals the complex relationship between demographics, spatial dynamics and security issues both within and surrounding the Lebanese state. As we discovered in Chapter I, confessionalism is very much rooted in Lebanon’s geography. This, in turn, relates to struggles for power, resources and representation, which Salamey terms the ‘the spatial dilemma’ (Salamey 2009, p.89). He argues that sectarian leaders have consistently sought to inflate each of their community’s demographic presence in order to maximise their resources and influence (Gebhardt et al. 2005; Salamey 2009, p.90). They also seek to obtain control of vital strategic locations, such as cities, major roads, ports, airports, border crossings and industrial and tourist areas (Salamey 2009, p.89-90). In the 1990s, the Hariri family was accused by other sects of using the new Solidere commercial centre and surrounding reconstruction projects to ensure Sunni control over central Beirut (Salamey 2009, p.90). Similarly, in 2007 Walid Jumblatt claimed that Hezbollah was using Iranian capital to buy large amounts of property in order to augment the Shiite share of the population and take control of important military locations throughout the state (Salamey 2009, p.90). This domestic spatial dilemma is also tied to regional dynamics. Shiites, for example, dominate Lebanon’s border with Israel, which heightens their role in the Arab-Israeli and Iranian-Israeli hostilities (Salamey 2009, p.91). This was apparent during the 1970s and 1980s, when the Shiites offered this area to the Palestine Liberation Organisation as a battleground for guerrilla warfare with Israel (Salamey 2009, p.91). In a similar way, ‘Lebanon’s border geography interacts with the dynamics of the Syrian conflict in complex ways’ (Salem 2012, p.7). Clashes in late 2011 took place primarily in the Bekaa and Akkar regions along the northern border, where there are close ties between Syrian rebels and Sunni towns and villages (Salem 2012, p.7). Moreover, as referred to above in the Tripoli
case, it is across this northern border that support and arms flow to the Sunni rebels (Salem 2012, p.7). In addition to this, the influx of Syrian refugees has seen Lebanon’s population increase by approximately ten percent and many look set to remain there for years to come. This has already put a serious strain on the communities that they have settled in, both in terms of resources and inter-communal conflict, and there are fears that clashes could arise in Shiite regions housing the predominantly Sunni refugees (Chulov 2013; Salem 2012, p.8).

At the heart of this dilemma is the inherent weakness of the Lebanese state. Pierre Gamayel, founder of the Phalange party, once stated that ‘Lebanon's strength is in its weakness’ (Fakhreddie 2006). This was echoed by the founder of the Lebanese constitution, Michel Chiha, who believed that the influence of the state should be kept small:

‘Work is more easily done...here than elsewhere, because the state has not yet got to the stage at which...the public authorities make it impossible to breathe.’

(Chiha quoted in Barak 2003, emphasis in original)

Leaders at the time of Independence believed that minimal state institutions, power-sharing and a non-ambitious foreign policy would protect Lebanon from conflict (Barak 2003, p.316). In the 1970s, Nordlinger described Lebanon as a ‘nightwatchman state’, a situation engineered by the elites in order to maintain the need for their clientelistic networks (Nordlinger quoted in Barak 2003, p.314). Barak argues that the founding leaders regarded the state as simply a mechanism for delegating power between the religious communities, thereby underestimating its vital role in plural societies, which is to foster ‘over-arching loyalties’ (2003, p.314). This weakness is thus closely tied to confessional politics in that, as discussed in the previous chapter, the sect has effectively usurped the role of the state. Another facet of the ‘strength in weakness’ thesis is its foreign policy implications.
Fakhreddine (2006) interprets Gemayel’s statement as a belief that, by keeping its military capacity weak, Lebanon in fact safeguards its security, as foreign powers will always be competing for control over it. Because there are several such powers, so the argument follows, ‘there will always be a sort of external power-check preventing domination by a single power, hence sparing Lebanon from exclusive foreign dominance’ (Fakhreddine 2006). However, this calculation has since proved false. Far from providing a ‘power-check’, the weak state has repeatedly rendered Lebanon an arena for proxy conflicts and regional war-mongering, as was keenly observed in the 2006 war with Israel. While state weakness has prevented the emergence of an authoritarian regime as occurred in neighbouring countries, it has simultaneously left the country highly vulnerable to penetration from foreign powers who seek to mould it into their particular vision of Lebanon. For this reason, Lebanon’s sovereignty was essentially absent for the entire period from the Civil War until 2005 due to Syrian occupation.

This weak state, coupled with a political structure that glorifies the sect above all, has led to a situation in which an Islamist militia, Hezbollah, is able to manipulate and at times exercise greater power than the central government. While the government is gripped by political stalemate year after year, Hezbollah continues to grow in power and military might. Their armed force is larger, stronger and more loyal than the Lebanese army, and their representative clout grants them ‘sufficient power to block anything the government wants to do’ (Cook quoted in Pan 2006). Richard Murphy, former US ambassador to Syria and Saudi Arabia, claims that Hezbollah soldiers are so dedicated that they follow a ‘cult of death’, in which martyrdom is prized as a badge of honour (Murphy quoted in Pan 2006). In contrast, the Lebanese army - considered by some the only enduring symbol of national unity - is made up largely of poor Shiites who demonstrate little allegiance to the nation (Pan 2006). As Cook states, parliament fears strong military force will trigger a return to civil war:
‘You can't tell the Shiites in the army to shoot Hezbollah, and if you tell any other group to do it, that's civil war.’

(Cook quoted in Pan 2006)

Hezbollah’s dominance is particularly problematic in light of the Syrian crisis. Salafi leader Sheikh Ahmad Assir, who recently staged an anti-Hezbollah sit-in in Sidon, crystallised the general sentiment amongst Sunnis in following statement: ‘They [Hezbollah] and Amal control the state, they give jobs to their people while ours are unemployed, and they attack us on every front while the government does nothing’ (Barnes-Dacey 2012, p.4).

To conclude, the uprising in Syria has placed a number of pressures on Lebanon’s confessional system. The massive influx of Syrian refugees into Lebanon has thrown its delicate denominational balance off kilter, increasing competition for resources and exacerbating sectarian tension in the communities they have settled in. Furthermore, the crisis has directly pitted Lebanese citizens against one another across the border on Syrian soil, as Lebanese Sunnis leave to fight alongside their spiritual brothers to take down the Assad regime, which is supported in part by Shiite Hezbollah soldiers. This situation reveals significant deficiencies in consociational theory. Firstly, Lijphart’s thesis severely underestimates the transnational nature of religious and ethnic identity in contemporary society. Furthermore, by allowing the sect to replace the role of the state, consociational democracy weakens central government so much that Lebanon’s territorial sovereignty is repeatedly undermined by both non-state actors and foreign states.
IV. What are the prospects for reform?

If the Lebanese political system is to be sustained, it must undergo considerable reform. This issue is presently high on the public agenda due to the imminent parliamentary elections, which the new Prime Minister has warned may be delayed while the government seeks agreement on a new electoral law. The debate over confessionalism is not a new one: secularists campaigned for de-confessionalisation as early as the 1950s and the 1989 Taef Agreement promised – to no avail - the creation of a non-confessional bicameral legislature at an unspecified future date (Muhanna 2010). Here, we will examine prospective reforms and their likelihood of being implemented.

In 2005, former Minister Fouad Boutros set up the National Commission on Electoral Law at the request of Prime Minister Siniora. This committee – otherwise known as the Boutros Commission – sought to draft a new electoral law that would provide fairer representation while still respecting the tenets of the Taef Agreement. They proposed a mixed electoral system in which certain legislative seats would be elected according to the majoritarian system with small constituencies and the rest ‘on a proportional basis with large constituencies’ (Ekmekji 2012, p.11). Other proposals included reducing the voting age to 21, creating a 30% quota for women on electoral lists, allowing expatriate voting, barring incumbent Ministers from standing for Parliament and establishing an independent body to monitor campaign financing (Ekmekji 2012, p.9). However, following the 2006 Israeli invasion and ensuing troubles, this draft was shelved. Then, during emergency meetings at Doha in 2008, the authorities hastily cobbled together an agreement which effectively reverted back to the pre-Taef, 1960 electoral law (Ekmekji 2012, p.11).

An alternative model was subsequently put forward by Interior Minister Marwan Charbel in 2011. This draft proposed a system of proportional representation in which the voter would
nominate their top two preferred candidates. This would replace the current bloc vote (BV) system, which has essentially created a party bloc vote in which ‘blocs often sweep seats in a district after winning a simple majority or a simple plurality’ (Milligan 2012). In the proposed system however, ‘this first vote determines the candidates who will be on the lists, and a second vote based on proportional shares of a given district will determine who among them will take office’ (Ekmekji 2012, p.13). According to this model, Lebanon would be divided into thirteen medium-sized districts. Like the Boutros Commission proposal, Charbel’s plans include provisions for expatriate voting and a gender quota. Charbel also called for a committee to supervise the elections in concert with the Ministry of the Interior. This law was approved by the majority of ministers, with the notable exception of Druze figurehead Walid Jumblatt, who claims that minorities would be ‘diluted’ through proportional representation (Ekmekji 2012, p.12).

Another contender on the scene is the so-called ‘Orthodox Gathering’ law, which proposes transforming the entire country into one district in which citizens would only be able to vote for representatives from their own sect. This proposal has drawn considerable controversy, having been submitted by Free Patriotic Movement members Alain Aoun and Neemtallah Abi Nasr after their party had already voted for the Charbel law. This draft has gained significant momentum, attracting support from Christian parties, Hezbollah and the Amal party. Christians in particular believe it will settle the issue of ‘artificial equality’ by allowing them control over their own representatives. However, prominent leaders such as President Suleiman and Walid Jumblatt have heavily criticised the Orthodox proposal, believing it to further deepen sectarian divisions. The former even took to his Twitter account to announce the following: ‘I will challenge the Orthodox proposal and I will not back down on my decision... I will challenge it a million times if the parliament approves it’ (Suleiman quoted in Naharnet 2013). So divisive is this law that it drove former Prime Minister Mikati to his
resignation. It is also opposed by the Sunni-majority Future Movement and the independent Christians of March 14.

Aside from this, academics lean towards recommendations similar to that of the Boutros Commission, often with the addition of bicameralism. Dr. Arda Arsenian Ekmekji, who served on the board of both the Boutros Commission and the Supervisory Commission for the Electoral Campaign in 2009, envisages the implementation of the Boutros proposals ‘in stages (over, say, three election cycles, or 12 years), culminating in the creation of a bicameral Parliament with a senate, ensuring confessional and civil-secular privileges’ (2012, p.3). Similarly, Salamey proposes ‘integrative consociationalism’, a hybrid system marked by ‘bicameralism, duality of administrative local and national governance, mixed electoral system, and cross-cutting electoral districting’ (Salamey 2009, p.95). According to Ekmekji, the work of political science experts Matthew Shugart and Martin Wattenburg demonstrates that the mixed electoral system would be ‘the best of both worlds’ (Ekmekji 2012, p.11) By combining sectarian and non-sectarian elements, the integrative consociational model would permit the electorate to ‘express dual identities’, as sectarian representation would be guaranteed ‘in the upper house while national citizenship is manifested in the secular vote to the lower house’ (Salamey 2009, p.96). This would serve to institutionalise secular ‘self-determination’ at the same time as permitting confessional ‘pre-determination’ (Salamey 2009, p.96). Here, Salamey borrows from Lijphart’s principle of ‘self-determination’, described as ‘a conciliatory power sharing proposition between ethnic and non-ethnic groups and individuals (2009, p.95, Lijphart, 2006, p.285). Simply put, such a system would make sectarian membership voluntary rather than ‘predetermined’ as in the current model (Hanf 1981, p.249). In theory, this should moderate confessional cleavages as political
developments become less of a ‘zero-sum game’ of sect against sect. Rather, the proposed Senate would be a secular space where discussion over national issues could flourish.

Since the Taef Agreement, the question of bicameralism has hung over Lebanon. Muhanna notes that in 2009 President Suleiman expressed his support for bicameralism, adding that Nabih Berri, Walid Jumblatt, Amin Gemayel, and a number of other key political players made ‘similarly vague statements in support of Ta’if and a bicameral transition towards a non-confessional system’ (2012, p.6). The classic argument in favour of a bicameral structure is that it would ‘amalgamate the preferences of different constituencies’ (Tsebelis and Money 1997). However, it is as yet unclear how this would work in practice and the idea remains severely under-theorised (Muhanna 2012). In light of this, Muhanna argues that, although a bicameral solution has the potential to moderate cleavages, if badly designed it could instead ‘paralyse its government, adding new layers of costly bureaucracy and creating an additional arena for corrupt and reactionary politics’ (2012, p.29).

However, reform will not come about through electoral engineering alone. Maronite leader Nasrallah Boutros Sfeir once proclaimed that, ‘Confessionalism must be eliminated from Lebanese hearts before it can be eliminated from Lebanese laws’ (quoted in Muhanna 2010). Indeed, confessional concerns are so embedded in Lebanese society that it seems unlikely they will be immediately abandoned ‘with a few strokes of a politician's pen’ (Muhanna 2010). Although 82% of Lebanese believe that the country needs a new electoral law (Milligan 2012), Lebanon still lacks a strong secular civil movement that will push for change. The Laique Pride marches offer some hope for secularism, having managed to gather thousands on the streets of Beirut in 2010 (The Daily Star 2010) and around 600 in 2012 (Salhani 2012). Moreover, some of the problems associated with confessionalism are not just
symptoms of the ‘confessional disease’ but a case of ‘comorbidity’, with their roots in social and economic as well as religious factors. These must thus be resolved through other means, such as strengthening the state, combating corruption and moderating economic inequality.

To conclude this section, reform is currently high on the agenda in Lebanese public discourse. However, no group is seriously considering complete deconfessionalisation and the most sensible solution appears to be some kind of hybrid system that would combine both sectarian and secular elements. The Orthodox Gathering law is rapidly gaining support amongst some Shia and Christian groups, further polarising Lebanon’s already fragmented political landscape. With the parliamentary elections rapidly approaching, the time for considered debate is running out.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it has become increasingly evident that Lebanon’s confessional system is unsustainable. In Chapter I, we discovered that confessional structures developed in Lebanon as a means to accommodate a multiplicity of religious communities within the same state. The 1943 National Pact represented the moment when confessional leaders came together to create a unified Lebanon, marking the birth of a system of consensus and compromise. Chapter II offered a deeper reflection on the logic behind power-sharing arrangements, demonstrating why some scholars deem them appropriate for deeply segmented societies. Chapter III sought to answer whether consociational democracy has fulfilled its normative aims in Lebanon, namely the provision of a stable democracy. This study demonstrates that, despite its initial success, the confessional system has failed to moderate cleavages in Lebanon, and has instead further fragmented its political culture. The principle of appointing officials according to sectarian affiliation has stagnated Lebanon’s political channels,
diminishing genuine competition. Furthermore, the integration of sectarian militia leaders into the post-Civil War leadership was detrimental to state legitimacy, leaving the citizenry distrustful of the government. This system also entrenched the highly stratified nature of Lebanese political culture, giving inordinate influence to elites who sometimes abuse it for personal ends. The two-stream legal system, while sensible in theory, has negated the emergence of a strong national identity and blinded citizens to issues outside their confessional remit. It is also unable to deal with the new social realities facing Lebanon, as minority groups such as migrant workers, adherents to unrecognised religions and the non-religious fail to secure certain basic civil liberties. In addition, the mutual veto and tripartite structure overestimates the Executive’s ability to reach consensus, leading to political inertia. This has in turn attracted extra-institutional leveraging, particularly from Hezbollah.

Further to this, the Syrian uprising has unveiled the confessional system’s inability to withstand regional turbulence. As has been iterated, this stems in part from the fact that consociational democracy does not take into account the transnational nature of religious identity, which leaves internal political stability at the mercy of religious rivalries outside state borders. This has been compounded by the inherent weakness of the Lebanese state, which has been propped up by foreign actors throughout its history. The primacy of the sect and patron-client relations has facilitated the rise of Hezbollah, a militia which is at times able to exert greater influence that the government itself. Each of these factors has contributed to the polarisation of Lebanese political society into two distinct camps, symbolised by the March 8 and March 14 coalitions. Finally, Chapter IV allowed for an explanation of proposed reforms to the political system. This author maintains that, in order to survive current pressures, Lebanon must adopt a hybrid model of governance that would allow secular identity and national issues to flourish alongside confessional concerns. However, support is growing for the Orthodox Gathering draft, a law which would in fact
consolidate confessionalism by only allowing the citizen to vote for a representative from their own sect. The question of reform has further divided the nation and led to yet another collapse of government following the resignation of Najib Mikati.

In order to take the research a stage further, a deeper exploration of constitutional alternatives would be apt. Simply put, we have discovered what does not work in Lebanon, but have been unable to pinpoint a comprehensive alternative system to replace it. This sentiment is perhaps best captured in the following statement: ‘No political system can be reformed (let alone abolished) unless there is something to take its place, and in all the heated discussion over deconfessionalism there is a marked lack of detail about precisely what it would involve’ (Muhanna 2010). In reality, however, it seems unlikely that the type of system recommended here will govern the impending parliamentary elections. President Suleiman declared in March that he would rather approve a draft ‘based on the 1960 law or any other electoral law’ than postpone the election, adding, ‘I don't care if we adopt the law of daemons but I will not accept the postponement’ (Suleiman quoted in Naharnet 2013).

References


### Table 1

*Confessional representation in the Lebanese legislature as of 2005*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religion</th>
<th>Confession</th>
<th>Registered Voters</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Elected MPs</th>
<th>%</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Christians</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Maronites</td>
<td>667,556</td>
<td>22.19</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>26.56</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Greek Orthodox</td>
<td>236,402</td>
<td>7.86</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>10.94</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Greek Catholic</td>
<td>156,521</td>
<td>5.20</td>
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<td>6.25</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Armenian Orthodox</td>
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<td>3.01</td>
<td>5</td>
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<td>Protestant</td>
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<td>Chaldean</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Nestorian</td>
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<td>Syriac</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jacobites</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Latin</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Copt</td>
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<td><strong>Total Christians</strong></td>
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<td>1,235,798</td>
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<td>Sunni</td>
<td>795,233</td>
<td>26.44</td>
<td>27</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Shi’ite</td>
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<td>27</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Druze</td>
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<td>Alawite</td>
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<td>100.00</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Lebanese Ministry of Interior.*

(Salamey & Payne 2008, p.457)
Map 1

Religious composition of the core areas of the Middle East

(Mappery 2008)
Map 2

Religious composition of Lebanon in 2010

(Columbia University 2010)
Map 3

Religious composition of Beirut

(Mappery 2009)