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Sectarianism in Lebanon and Syria The Dynamics of Mutual Spill-Over

Summary

- When the Arab revolutions reached Syria, the Sunni-Shia cleavage in Lebanon was already well in the making. Syria's turmoil only added fuel to an existing fire in Lebanon.
- Syria's crisis is intensifying Sunni-Shia tensions in Lebanon on two levels, symbolic and identity-based on the one hand, and geopolitical or interest based, on the other hand.
- The shift toward identity-based or symbolic forms of sectarianism can probably be explained by the existential character the struggle in the Levant is taking, whereby both "communities," however imagined or over-constructed, are coming to perceive themselves as defending not only their share of resources or power, but their very survival.
- Lebanon's minority communities – including Christian and Druze – are increasingly anxious about the changing regional environment.
- Lebanon and Syria must face the difficult equation of sectarian diversity and national unity.

“Perceptions of existential threat among the Shia community coexist with a paradoxical sense of hubris and power that became especially evident after Hezbollah's performance in the 2006 war with Israel. Both feelings translate into a growing aggressiveness on the part of Shia political actors, which extend to debates over state institutions and decisions as well as strategies of social control and the silencing of dissenting voices within the Shia community.”

Background

The armed conflict that has come to define the Syrian revolution has unleashed dormant sectarian tensions and cleavages within Syrian society, and has spilled over into neighboring countries, mainly Lebanon, where conflicts along old but renewed fault-lines are now rampant.

When discussing sectarianism in the “twin” Levant states of Syria and Lebanon, especially after the dynamics unleashed by the Syrian revolution, it is critical to bear in mind the distinctive forms that sectarian dynamics have taken in the two countries. Both Lebanese and Syrian societies reflect communitarian and, in the Syrian case, ethnic differences, and both can be described as “plural” or “heterogeneous,” but a crucial difference distinguishes the dynamics of sectarian politics in Lebanon and Syria. Sectarianism in Lebanon has not only been recognized and acknowledged as a sociological fact; it has also been formalized and legalized within state and non-state institutions and inscribed in the constitution. Lebanon's sectarian power-sharing system traces its origins and consolidation back to the mid-19th century, with the establishment of the Mutasarrifiyya, the Ottoman province of Mount Lebanon, in 1860. It was subsequently reinforced with the creation of the Republic of Lebanon in 1920 and its 1926 constitution, and in the National Pact of 1943 that was renewed by the 1990 Taif Agreement, that revised the formal constitution but without structurally touching the aspects related to political sectarianism. In contrast, with the exception of

a brief period under the French Mandate, Syria's political construction has been marked by a very voluntaristic, "Jacobin," and centralized nation-building experience, to the extent of even stigmatizing sectarian affiliations or proclamations of sectarian identity. These patterns were amplified with the rise of Arab nationalist parties in the 1950s, and further reinforced from the 1960s onwards with the coming to power of the Baath Party in a variety of forms. The epitome of this contrast is especially visible in the political posture of the Christian communities in the two countries. Where Lebanon's Christians were crucial to the emergence of Lebanonism as a "partial" form of nationalism in the Arab East, Christians in Syria were more often than not advocates of pan-Arab nationalism.

At a moment when exit strategies for Syria's ordeal often evoke the path of a "Taif formula" of sectarian power-sharing, this structural difference in the historical trajectories of the two countries is worth recalling. It suggests that embedding sectarianism in Syria's state and non-state institutions may be more complicated and less stable than advocates of a Taif-style outcome for Syria suggest.

A second consideration concerns the issues of sequencing and causality. If it is undeniable that the Syrian crisis increasingly threatens to infect Lebanon's body politic, one has to bear in mind that sectarian tensions in Lebanon, and especially Sunni-Shia tensions, pre-date the beginning of the Syrian revolution. Its most recent incarnations can be traced to 2005 and the profound fissures caused in Lebanon by the assassination of Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, but the roots of the cleavage can be found in the making and implementation of the Taif Agreement itself, and the architecture of power that was imposed in post-war Lebanon under Syrian tutelage. The post-war system can be summed up as having transferred political hegemony from the Christian Maronite community to an ambiguous shared dominance of the Sunni and Shia communities, with Syria mediating their competitive excesses, and domesticating the two rising forces of liberal Sunnism following Hariri's murder and the more statist, anti-Western Shiism of Hezbollah. A first and serious crack in this delicately balanced edifice occurred in 2003, when many Lebanese perceived the Iraq war and the fall of Saddam Hussein as a shift in the sectarian equilibrium that worked to the detriment of Sunni Arabs across the region. Hariri's death amplified these perceptions; Hezbollah's bold performance in the July 2006 war and its takeover of Beirut and other Sunni areas in 2008-2009 effectively consolidated such concerns.

Therefore, when the Arab revolutions reached Syria, the Sunni-Shia cleavage in Lebanon was already well underway. Syria's turmoil only adds fuel to an existing fire.

The Syrian Crisis and Sunni-Shia Tensions in Lebanon

Syria's crisis is intensifying Sunni-Shia tensions in Lebanon on two levels, symbolic and identity-based on the one hand, and geopolitical or interest based, on the other hand.

These levels are not mutually exclusive: more often, one nurtures the other and the two are often expressed in ways that make it difficult to distinguish between them. Nevertheless, it is certain that Syria's open bloodshed has brought profound change to mechanisms of inter-sectarian mobilization in Lebanon, transforming what had been more interest-based and "political" modes of mobilization into identity-based and "religious" modes. From stories about conversions to Shiism -forced or induced- that are widespread in Sunni areas, to the mobilization of Shia brigades in the name of defending the holy shrine of Sayeda Zeinab in Damascus; from YouTube videos displaying pro-regime Shabbihis forcing young revolutionaries to kneel in front of Assad's photo and shout "la ilah illa Bachar"; to increasingly entrenched narratives circulating in the Southern Shia suburbs of Beirut that Damascus' burning is the scripted prelude to the Mahdi's return and the end of times, there has been a dangerous blurring of "interest-based" and "identity-based" boundaries.

This shift toward identity-based or symbolic forms of sectarianism can probably be explained by the existential character the struggle in the Levant is taking, whereby both “communities,” however imagined or over-constructed, are coming to perceive themselves as defending not only their share of resources or power, but their very survival. The more intense the conflict and the more open-endedly violence is deployed, the more that sectarian competition is internalized as a zero-sum game, where negotiation and compromise are equated with defeat and loss. For the Lebanese Shia community, the potential fall of the Assad regime is a vital blow to the resistance axis linking it to Iran, and beyond this, the basis for a Sunni continuum from Lebanon to Iraq through Syria, that will threaten to return the Shia community to an era of subordination and Sunni domination. Similarly, for Lebanese Sunni- and their allies, only the fall of Assad will free them and the Lebanon they envision from Iranian-backed Shia hegemony, and permit justice to prevail after years of living in the shadow of Shia violence. These local aspects of sectarianization mesh with regional trends, as well, feeding into the “warm” war between Iran and the Gulf Sunni monarchies, and between Iran and Turkey, as well.

The Psychology of Sectarian Representation in Lebanon

As a result of the above trends, a more intense, perhaps exaggerated psychology of sectarian representation is taking hold in Lebanon. Perceptions of existential threat among the Shia community coexist with a paradoxical sense of hubris and power that became especially evident after Hezbollah’s performance in the 2006 war with Israel. Both feelings translate into a growing aggressiveness on the part of Shia political actors, which extend to debates over state institutions and decisions as well as strategies of social control and the silencing of dissenting voices within the Shia community.

Within the Sunni community, the cumulative effect of recent events, including the empowerment of Shia after the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the assassination of Hariri in 2005, the Hezbollah “coup” in Beirut in 2008-2009 and, later, the toppling of Saad Hariri’s government, has produced an unbearable accumulation of humiliations and resentment. These perceptions are reinforced by a growing sense of distrust toward state institutions, especially the Lebanese Army, which is increasingly perceived as a vigilante extension of Hezbollah when crucial security decisions must be made. The sense of humiliation and resentment is also made potentially dangerous by an erosion of the traditional political leadership inside the Sunni community, with Saad Hariri living abroad for the last two years and an absence of other contenders to fill the vacuum he has left behind, as well as a parallel and seemingly unstoppable rise of radical Salafi factions further mobilized by the ongoing fight in Syria. On the regional level, traditional Sunni support has been weakened by Saudi Arabia’s shifting priorities following the Arab uprisings of 2011 and the soft rift between the Kingdom and Qatar.

Alongside these two “super-communities,” which are at odds on the Lebanese scene, are sects that increasingly perceive themselves as endangered “minorities.” While Christian political concerns since the end of the war Lebanese civil war in 1990 focused on growing marginalization and the loss of pre-eminence, they are now directed toward the lethal polarization between the Shia and Sunni camps. This process has also been at work since 2005 and the Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon, but it has been consolidated and crystallized by the conflict in Syria and the powerful imagery it projects in terms of the anti-Christian and anti-minority rhetoric that is evident among some elements of the opposition. A “Maaloula effect”—referencing one of the world’s most ancient Christian settlements which was caught up in the civil war over this past summer—has further amplified the uncertain fate for Levantine Christians in the wake of the Arab Spring. In a slightly different pattern, the Druze community is also watching with anxiety as

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

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its regional environment unravels. This small community, stretched over triangular area at the intersection of Syria, Lebanon, and Israel, is well aware that for years or decades to come the region is likely to be in the grip of fierce infighting, and that the Druze will confront significant challenges to avoid being further weakened as broader sectarian trends unfold. Whether in the Shuf mountains of Lebanon or the Jabal Druze of Suwaida in Syria, old-new ideas of buffer zones and self-security are re-emerging in the Druze quest for communal neutrality.

Sectarian Diversity and National Unity in an Emergent Middle East

The Syrian cauldron has already reawakened longstanding issues related to sectarian and communitarian accommodation in the region, questions that nation-states have repressed for more than five decades. From the quasi-institutional federation put in place in Iraq after the fall of Saddam, to the difficult question of how the Alawi factor will be addressed in post-Assad Syria, to the Kurdish resurgence reaching across Syria and Iraq into Turkey, the difficult equation of sectarian diversity and national unity is bluntly on the table again. Lebanon will in no way escape these questions. Its proper sectarian answer, that of a consociational semi-democratic architecture, is now seriously shaking, and its reshuffling is inextricably tied to regional trends and, in particular, to the conflict currently playing out in Syria.



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