"A failure in the process of nation building: the Lebanese state before the civil war"

By Luca MAIOTTI

Written for the course:

International Relations in the Middle East

Taught by Fawaz Gerges

Fall 2014

This paper has received the *KSP Student Paper Award*
of the Kuwait Program at Sciences Po

A failure in the process of nation-building : the Lebanese State before the Civil War

Introduction

The State in the Middle East has constantly suffered from a certain number of dysfunctional characteristics which have harmed its possibilities to secure its role in the international arena. Lebanon is one of the most salient examples of this historical tendency. This country has struggled during its entire existence in order to find a difficult balance between both its internal structure and the regional or international system. In other words, the main issue for the Lebanese State has been – and still is today - its sovereignty, that is the exclusive right to exercise supreme political (e.g. legislative, judicial and executive) authority. The notion of sovereignty is correlated with the concept of nation. Indeed, the model of State derived from the Westphalian Treaties defined the population that was the object of sovereignty as the nation, i.e., a large number of people who shared the same consciousness of belonging to the same political community. The purpose of this essay is to show how the process of nation-building did not lead to the formation of an actual Lebanese national identity and full political sovereignty, thus showing that the quest for full State legitimacy is yet to be accomplished.

Theoretical framework

Edward Said's groundbreaking work and the postcolonial literature explain the inability of the State to assert its sovereignty in the Middle Eastern context in general – and Lebanon in particular – as State and Middle East themselves are cultural categories and historical institutions which were recreated and imposed by Western powers. Post-colonialist studies highlighted the exogenous structural character of both these institutions in a historical and cultural perspective. In the past, geographical portions of land and local societies had experienced alternative forms of political organisation which were distinct from the original European concept of State.

The postcolonial and post-structuralist approaches may be useful to analyse the Lebanese case. It is necessary to question the "conceptual prison" of pre-determined identities and social structures that frequently derives from an unconscious prejudice, fruit of a broad Western traditional way of thinking. A more complex and nuanced approach should be based on a bottom-up and inside-out movement in order to grasp the bigger picture and distance itself from the dominant schools of thought. However, if the postcolonial and post-structuralist approaches have proven very successful in the *pars destruens*, that is, the critique, they have not managed to develop a *pars construens*, in other words, a proper international relations theory.

This is the reason why a constructivist paradigm would be more effective in the study of the Lebanese case. In the constructivist vision, raw objective facts are taken into account for their social meanings. These meanings are the result of a complex process of combined beliefs, ideas and histories through which people perceive and give sense to the world. Therefore identity and beliefs have a central role in this demarche. In fact, the essential process of deconstructing the notion of identity is necessary to analyse such an "emotional" and intricate matter. Theories like Realism or Neo-Realism which assume the State to be a unitary, rational factor, do not seem to be useful at this stage of investigation.

Nation-building

The young Lebanese post-colonial State showed hardly any real progress in attaining the model of nation-state imposed by the Great Powers, France in particular. The origins of this lack of success can be traced back to the failure of the nation-building process. Indeed, Ernest Gellner showed how nation – in the same way as identity – is a construction in the first place, that is, the final product of a contingency of human action. In other words, nations can be, to a significant degree, assembled, this aspect being epitomised in the expression "nation-building". In this sense the assumptions of primordialist theories[1] – that nations are natural, ever-existing phenomena – need to be rejected. Certain facts, myths, histories, and interpretations are specifically chosen and then spread by institutional means in order to construct a political ideology. Communities do not have specific features *ab origine* and do not maintain a fixed nature over time.

This "moulding" process is much more effective as the State is the main identifier for the individual. In other words, governments should not only limit their action to material factors such as economy, infrastructures, and institutions, but they should try to develop an "emotional attachment" to the State.[2] This process eases the shift from a situation of mere "negative sovereignty" – i.e. the assurance of no external interference with no regard for the actual capacity to govern – to a condition of "positive sovereignty" - which is the development of internal integrity in order to shape the economy, society and politics.[3] Although a negative sovereignty, albeit a thin negative sovereignty, was *de facto* accepted in the Lebanese system, the postcolonial State failed to consolidate its institutions and forge a national ideology.

In particular, the central problem has been the relationship between the individual and the State. The attachment to an abstract, vertical, entity, e.g. the *République* and its values, is not seen as natural as the attachment to a tangible, horizontal community – the ethno-religious community, the enlarged family. The difference between the two types of attachment is vital because it deals with the issues of identity and legitimacy. Where there are many different types of identities which may be superimposed or even in contrast with one another, for instance religious, linguistic, and tribal affiliations – national identity needs to take primacy over the others in order be politically relevant. As a matter of fact, as a result of a centuries-old practice, the European state has sublimated (and tends to sublimate) all forms of political sovereignty and has relegated religious, linguistic and ethnic memberships to the private sphere.

The post-colonial Lebanese State was not able to fulfil this process of nation-building. The institutions such as the army, the education system, the political parties and the media which should have implemented this process became the hostage of the sectarian ethno-religious divisions within Lebanese society. Various forms of political membership such as family, church, and agnatic group which are independent of the idea of the State thrived because of the inability of the State to create and implement a challenging national ideology.

Institution-building

The failure in the process of condensing ethno-religious affiliations into a national *Gemeinschaft* influenced, and was influenced in return by, the development of institutions. State appears to be an independent variable, if possible separated from society, economics and politics.

To what extent should France be held responsible? Firstly, the main difficulty for the coloniser was the creation of a State which was both economically viable and strategically advantageous – a case for the Christian community – in order to maintain cultural and political leverage in the area. Secondly, C. Winslow asserts that France made a concerted effort to create a new Lebanon in the French mould by helping the country to develop a modern secular system. The basic assumption of modern secularism is that how we do what we do takes priority over what we do, in other words the instrumental has primacy over the substantive. Nevertheless, the French never allowed the Lebanese people to learn to run their own affairs of state, businesses, or international relations because this would have predictably led to an actual loss of power and

---

[1] Eller J.David & Coughlan M. Reed " The poverty of primordialism: The demystification of ethnic attachments", *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, Volume 16, Issue 2, 1993 p. 184.

[2] Wesley Micheal, "The State of the Art on the Art of State Building", *Global Governance*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (July–September 2008), p. 373.

[3] Jackson, Robert, "International Engagement in War-Torn Countries," *Global Governance* 10, Vol. 10, No. 1 (Winter 2004), pp. 135-150.

to the end of the Mandate. Therefore at the moment of independence, the Lebanese postcolonial State was not ready to govern itself because it had never been permitted to do so on its own.[4] And the following years did not show an improvement.

State-building is generally defined as a focus on the effective functioning of rule of law and democracy, a transparent bureaucracy, security and the provision of basic services to the population. A brief overview of different sectors of the Lebanese institutions will demonstrate the lack of success of the institution-building process.

A document approved by the French mandatory power in 1926 laid down the essentials of the Constitution. Moreover, a side agreement included the equitable representation in the legislature of all the religious sects (six Christians to every five Muslims before the 1989 Taef Agreement). The system which resulted was one of confessional consociationalism, a type of rule which inevitably rated consensus above efficiency. This system was viewed by thinkers such as Michel Chiha as a means of achieving "unity in diversity". Political power-sharing and give-and-take processes among confessional minorities should have led to effective self-regulation. Although this rarely happened, it became a dominant discourse to justify the elites' rule through parliamentarism.[5]

Not only was the process of state-building never fully implemented in Lebanon, but post-colonial institutions were "re-colonised" or counter-colonised by traditional rationale and confessional membership. Groups armed themselves, thus invalidating Weber's assumption of the State's monopoly of the legitimate use of force. Articles 9[6] and 10[7] of the Constitution gave freedom of conscience, the guarantee of personal status and the right to their own education to the 18 officially recognised religions and sects. Even sport was affected: football and basketball teams became financially dependant on, and so the instrument of, political and ethno-religious leaders. For instance, Coca Cola sponsored three different teams, Sunni, Shi'i and Christian, so as to avoid being identified with only one of these communities.

In all sectors of society, the rule of the *za'im*, the chief of the enlarged family, is more effective than the rule of law. Basically patron-client transactions and exchange practices regulate everyday life such as access to services, work, and so on, at different levels. [8]

Conclusion

In conclusion, as can be seen through a post-colonialist and constructivist approach, the Lebanese processes of nation-building and state-building cannot be considered as achieved. The profound divisions in Lebanese society proved to be a dangerous frame for a diasastrous sectarian confrontation as early as 1958 and again from 1975. Nation as a political ideology is still weak when compared to ethno-religious membership and State is not the main identifier for the majority of the Lebanese population. Institutions basically reflect this inability to conceive of unity beyond diversity.

However, nation-building is a process. Recently-formed European states such as Italy still struggle over the same issue, although on a different scale. Generally speaking, nations, in terms of patterns and consolidation, take a long time to form. In this view, the "young" Lebanese state can still find its own way if a real and consistent effort in this sense is made.

---

[4] C. Winslow, *Lebanon: War and Politics in a Fragmented Society*, Routledge, 1996, p. 76.

[5] Cobban, Helena, *The Making of Modern Lebanon*, Hutchinson, 1985, p. 37.

[6] Art. 9 of the Lebanese Constitution: "There shall be absolute freedom of conscience. The state in rendering homage to the God Almighty shall respect all religions and creeds and shall guarantees, under its protection the free exercise of all religious rites provided that public order is not disturbed. It shall also guarantees that the personal status and religious interests of the population, to whatever religious sect they belong, shall be respected.

[7] Art. 10 of the Lebanese Constitution: "Education shall be free insofar as it is not contrary to public order and morals and does not affect the dignity of any of the religions or sects. There shall be no violation of the right of religious communities to have their own schools provided they follow the general rules issued by the state regulating public instruction"

[8] Suad Jospeph, "Political familism in Lebanon", Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science

Bibliography

Amor Andelfattah, « La notion d'"umma" dans les Constitutions des États arabes », *Arabica*, T. 30, Fasc. 3 (Sep., 1983), pp. 267-289.

Anderson Lisa, "The State in the Middle East and North Africa", *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (Oct., 1987), pp. 1-18.

Cobban, H., *The Making of Modern Lebanon*, Hutchinson, 1985.

Davis Eric, "A Sectarian Middle East?", *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 40, No. 4 (Nov., 2008), pp. 555-558.

Dekmeijan Richard Hrair, "Consociational Democracy in Crisis: The Case of Lebanon", *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (Jan., 1978), pp. 251-265.

Eller J.David & Coughlan M. Reed " The poverty of primordialism: The demystification of ethnic attachments", *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, Volume 16, Issue 2, 1993 pages 183-202.

Firro, K., *Inventing Lebanon: Nationalism and the State under the Mandate*, I. B. Tauris, 2003.

Hamzah A. Nizar, "Clientalism, Lebanon: Roots and Trends", *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 37, No. 3 (Jul., 2001), pp. 167-178.

Jackson, Robert, "International Engagement in War-Torn Countries," *Global Governance* 10, Vol. 10, No. 1 (Winter 2004), pp. 135-50.

Kanafani-Zahar Aida, «Pluralisme relationnel entre chrétiens et musulmans au Liban: l'émergence d'un espace de "laïcité relative"», Archives de sciences sociales des religions, 45e Année, No. 109 (Jan.-Mar., 2000), pp.118-147.

Landau Jacob M., "Elections in Lebanon", *Western Political Quarterly*, Vol. 14, No. 1, Part 1 (Mar.,1961), pp. 120-147.

Reiche Danyel, "War Minus the Shooting? The politics of sport in Lebanon as a unique case in comparative politics", *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 32, No. 2, 2011, pp. 261–277.

Suad Jospeph, "Political familism in Lebanon", *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*

Wesley Micheal, "The State of the Art on the Art of State Building", *Global Governance*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (July–September 2008), pp. 369-385.

Winslow, C., *Lebanon: War and Politics in a Fragmented Society*, Routledge, 1996.