Revisiting the Politics of Sectarianism Amidst Lebanon’s Concomitant Crises

Roundtable Summary Booklet

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Foreword

Three years have elapsed since the outbreak of Lebanon's 2019 October uprising framed as the *Thawra*. This moment in Lebanon's post-war history is groundbreaking for many reasons. It symbolizes people's uprising against a political class that has exploited states' resources and hollowed out institutions for more than 30 years after the end of Lebanon's Civil War. It is also a moment of reckoning. Lebanon's politics of sectarianism has ultimately failed in providing not only a formula enabling communal leaders to defuse conflicts but also to respond to citizens' basic needs and provide them with a dignified life and future perspectives.

The financial meltdown, the moribund banking system, the Beirut Blasts, and the various forms of multidimensional poverty that have afflicted citizens, displaced individuals and migrant workers represent the latest "morbid symptoms" of a decaying politics of sectarianism that has instrumentalized sectarian identity and patronage networks to ensure its survival. Gridlock has been one key characteristic of this decaying politics of sectarianism. On average, it takes Lebanon 111 days to form a government.[1] Examples of deadlock stretch from a 12-year absence of a public budget, a nine-year extension of the parliament that came to an end in 2018, a two-year presidential vacuum that ended in 2016, and an unresolved decision-making crisis over the waste management system which led by 2015 to the piling of garbage in almost all highways and streets of Beirut. Vacant executive posts, sectarianized institutions, and slow policymaking processes have incurred heavy losses on people's everyday realities.

How do we account for the impact of sectarian policy on people's daily lives? Examples abound. A survey found out that Lebanese are one of the unhappiest people in the world.[2] The Beirut Blasts and the latest financial meltdown have fomented a myriad of "negative emotions" ranging from despair, rage, stress, depression to the desire to permanently leave the country. Research established that illnesses and diseases have dramatically increased in the last years.[3] Many of these diseases are tightly linked to ecological degradation, rusty power factories, and air pollutants.

Throughout the last decades, much has been written on Lebanon's sectarian model of politics and its pitfalls. Academics have however been increasingly skeptical of research being able to find its way into policy in a system that is indifferent to change. Rima Majed refers to the double liminality in which activists and academics are caught in Lebanon today – torn between alienation and the drive to revolt.[4] Sleiman el Hajj talks about "Illness writing and Revolution".[5]

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[1] Salah Hijazi, "It takes Lebanon an average of 111 days to form a government," *L' Orient Le Jour* (June 28, 2022) https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1304346/it-takes-lebanon-an-average-of-111-days-to-form-a-government.html
[2] Gallup, "Who Are the Unhappiest People in the World? September 8, 2022, https://news.gallup.com/opinion/gallup/400667/unhappiest-people-world.aspx
[3] Joelle M. Abi-Rached, "Cancer, Catharsis, and Corruption in Lebanon", *Jadaliyya*, https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/40587
[4] Rima Majed. "Living Revolution, Financial Collapse and Pandemic in Beirut: Notes on Temporality, Spatiality, and "Double Liminality"", *Middle East Law and Governance* 12, 3 (2020): 305-315.
[5] Sleiman El Hajj Illness, "Writing and Revolution, Converging Narratives: The Year in Lebanon," *Biography*, 44, 1: 2021, 98-105.

With this background in mind, this roundtable event comes at a timely juncture to shed light on several issues:

- Revisit Lebanon's politics of sectarianism with a critical, historical lens and new analytical perspectives.
- Make sense of the "crisis upon crisis scenario" that Lebanese citizens and vulnerable communities living in Lebanon seem condemned to.
- Take stock of the Lebanese *Thawra* or October uprising and its implications for establishing new trade unions, citizen's associations, and a new political economy etc.
- Shed light on Lebanon's interaction with the uncertain geopolitical order that is taking shape in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. What implications does the war have for Lebanon and its economy? In the light of new conflicts and tensions, is focus on Lebanon in the international system receding into the background?
- And more broadly, share lessons bringing Lebanon in conversation with other conflicts and political systems including Northern Ireland, Iraq, Syria, Bosnia etc.

We invited academics, practitioners, and students from several interdisciplinary backgrounds to reflect on these lines of inquiry. One overarching question that structured the debate is: Beyond power-sharing studies, what research avenues and conceptual lenses would unlock new perspectives on Lebanon's sectarian model of politics, its resilience to change and its propensity to generate overlapping crises? What avenues of thinking shift the gaze from a mere condemnation of the system's ills to a productive debate on how research could make its way into policy? Participants reflected on various avenues of research ranging from political economy, social movement theory, policy, diaspora, and migration studies.

The workshop proceedings capture some of the debates and conversations we had. They suggest various research pathways that could inspire future research on Lebanon's political system and its broader relevance for conflict and political studies. Invited participants shared the extended synopsis of their talks that we are happy to include here.

Dr. Tamirace Fakhoury
Convenor of the event
Associate professor at Aalborg University, Denmark
Visiting Professor and Scientific advisor to the Kuwait Chair, Sciences Po, Paris (2020-2022)

Proceedings of the all-day KFAS Roundtable event: *Revisiting the Politics of Sectarianism Amidst Lebanon's Concomitant Crises*

On the 30th of June 2022, an all-day roundtable event on "**Revisiting the Politics of Sectarianism Amidst Lebanon's Concomitant Crises"** was held at Sciences Po Paris.[6] Hosted by **Tamirace Fakhoury** (Scientific Advisor to the Kuwait Chair at Sciences Po Paris & Associate Professor of Political Science, Aalborg University in Denmark) and co-organized with Miriam **Aitken** (Research Assistant to the Kuwait Chair), the event brought together academics, analysts, and professionals from various backgrounds. PSIA students also contributed to the moderation of panels and roundtable discussions.

To open the roundtable event, **Tamirace Fakhoury stressed the relevance of this roundtable event in the context of Lebanon's "crisis upon crisis" scenario. She highlighted the significance of reconceptualizing its sectarian model of politics from historical, geopolitical, and legal perspectives. Against this backdrop, Dr. Fakhoury** positioned her introductory speech in the context of the Lebanese *Thawra* that took place in October 2019, where Lebanese protesters mobilized to express their discontent with the country's political elites. Since then, the Beirut blast and the unprecedented economic collapse have further embodied the failure of sectarian governance in Lebanon. Indeed, the Lebanese are overwhelmingly discontent with their political system, which is in constant gridlock, yet the system has proven to be incredibly resilient to change. In this context, she underscored that this roundtable was convened **to assess the new status quo in Lebanon since the October 2019 uprising, historicize and revisit the politics of sectarianism with a critical lens, and to take a critical look at the new geopolitical order that will emerge from the Russian war in Ukraine**.

The first panel took a critical look at **governance by power-sharing and how it shaped Lebanon's concomitant crises from ontological, historical and political perspectives.**

Firstly, **Allison McCulloch** (Brandon University) presented her paper ***Conceptualizing Power-Sharing and its Dilemmas: A Case of Diminishing Returns?***, which looked at the theoretical background of power-sharing. She presented how governance by power-sharing ensures better representation but tends to slow down decision-making processes, for example, as it makes it easier for governments to avoid taking decisions. Through her analysis of different case studies, she deconstructed the idea that power-sharing makes gridlock inevitable and advanced that it could be

[6] Acknowledgements go to Sophie Clappier, Samira Boujidi, Miriam Aitken, and Chloe Malvasio for helping with and contributing to the organization of the event.

a meaningful form of government. In the case of Lebanon, the May 2022 elections could be the first step toward reform.

Nadim Shehadi (previously Lebanese American University New York headquarters Executive Director), in his paper ***Sectarianism is often in the eye of the beholder***, highlighted the importance of historicizing sectarianism in Lebanon. Indeed, Lebanon's political system is the result of a complex history of being under the authority of empires broader than itself. **Nadim Shehadi** suggested that as the Middle East adopted nationalism and secularism, a power-sharing system allowed for preserving cosmopolitanism in Lebanon.

In his paper, ***Militiamen turned politicians: how sectarian authoritarianism destroyed Lebanon***, **Makram Ouaiss** (Lebanese Centre for Policy Studies) highlighted how the current Lebanese crisis is the result of years of political grip from militias turned political elites. As the political elites created a discourse of hatred to promote themselves, governance became authoritarian in nature. Against this background, **Makram Ouaiss** argued that there is an urgent need to replace the sectarian discourse of the civil war, and he hopes that new parliament members will bring forward a new way of doing politics, that would be characterized by democracy, accountability and secularism.

John Nagle (Queen's University Belfast) presented his paper, ***Protesting Power-Sharing: Placing the Thawra in Recent Waves of Contentious Politics***, in which he presented how the identity of the protesters of the October 2019 uprising expanded beyond traditional sectarian understandings. Moreover, during the contentious episode, they articulated demands for change in the current Lebanese power-sharing system and ideals of a different, nonsectarian system of governance. However, he stressed how it is complicated to implement such ideals in the current authoritarian power-sharing system which is inhospitable to the development of opposition.

Photo Credit: Tamirace Fakhoury

Lastly, **Alessandra Thomsen** (Sciences Po, Paris School of International Affairs) presented findings from her master's thesis: ***An (In)escapable fate? Lebanon's endemic challenges and their manifestation in the Beirut blast.*** She used the example of the tragic event of the Beirut blast to showcase the interlocking mechanism that led to Lebanon's collapse. Specifically, she highlighted three dilemmas that led to this situation and manifested in the blast: the political system's organization that is prone to deadlock, the institutionalization of impunity, and the disconnection of elites from grassroots demands.

Following these presentations from panelists, the first discussion invited several experts with experience living and working in Lebanon to discuss "**How did Lebanon get there?"**. Opening the discussion, **Jim Muir** (BBC) underlined that if the crisis was inevitable, it had strongly been fueled by banks' poor management and investments. This was coopted by sectarian leaders and led to the drastic fall of the Lebanese currency and the collapse of the economy. Following this, **Makram Ouaiss** pointed out the role that the lack of reform, mismanagement, and culture of impunity had in the collapse of Lebanon. **Aya Majzoub** (Human Rights Watch) followed on by highlighting how the political system in Lebanon is the product of a social contract that relies on patronage and clientelism. As the Lebanese economy collapsed, this could not be sustained, and increased the country's discontent with corruption. She also believes that there is a generational change – sect identity matters less to younger generations – that could overcome the fear of change and open the door for a new system. Lastly, **Abby Sewell** (L'Orient Today) used the example of the energy sector to illustrate how mismanagement and poor investments from political elites ultimately led the people to be deprived of decent living conditions. Ultimately, this left individuals to take on personal initiatives to improve their conditions.

Photo Credit: Tamirace Fakhoury

Going further than Lebanon's current collapse, panelists were invited to think about **the changes in Lebanon's politics and how they impacted the country. Jim Muir** put forward the idea that

the biggest change in Lebanese politics was the empowerment of the Shia since the 1970s, which led to a change in the balance of power that is now divided between three groups (Maronites, Shia, and Sunni Muslims). **Makram Ouaiss** noted the general worsening of living conditions, which could lead to the disintegration of the bureaucracy and the military. Using her personal work experience as a human rights researcher and advocate, **Aya Majzoub** explained that the current situation in Lebanon impacted the way human rights organizations worked as they had to adapt to dire material conditions. Moreover, it also impacted the subject of their work that shifted from documenting violations of political human rights to socio-economic rights whose violations are harder to document and advocate for. Bringing a journalistic perspective to the discussion, **Abby Sewell** put forward the perspective that relative journalistic freedom remained throughout Lebanon, and that the privilege of being a foreign journalist in Lebanon came with a mission to convey its plight to the rest of the world. The Q&A session then addressed the conundrum of how the very system of power-sharing could possibly be authoritarian. **Aya Majzoub** argued that the political elite in Lebanon, although coming from different sects, all have the same interest as the repression of the *thawra* or the lack of accountability for the Beirut blast has shown. **Jim Muir** added to this that despite criticism, leaders remained and were unlikely to be voted out of office as people caught up in survival are politically dispirited.

The second panel addressed **Human rights, refugee struggles, and the international aid system** in Lebanon.

Firstly, **Aya Majzoub** (Human Rights Watch) presented ***the human rights landscape in Lebanon***. She noted that there has been a drastic deterioration of human rights in the past decade in Lebanon, most notably because of the crackdown on public speech and freedom of assembly, but also the lack of accountability of government officials and the increase of hate speech due to the creation of scapegoats by political elites (such as the LGBTI community or Syrian refugees). Moreover, the decrease of rights impacted the already marginalized communities disproportionately. Notably, repressive measures targeted refugees who are forced to live irregularly in dire conditions, as international aid is being appropriated by banks.

Following this, **Abby Sewell's** (L'Orient Today) presentation titled ***Unwelcome Guests: Syrian refugees in Lebanon and the decision to stay, go or return to Syria*** explained how refugees in Lebanon have three choices: to stay, to return, or to attempt to go to a third country. She emphasized that refugees' ability to either resettle in a third country or return to Syria was heavily impacted by the border closures during the Covid-19 pandemic, which led to an increase in illegal smuggling. As it is dangerous and expensive to leave for a third country or to return to Syria, she predicted that Syrian refugees will remain in Lebanon for the foreseeable future, continuing to stretch its resources.

Lastly, **Clothilde Facon** (University Sorbonne Paris Nord) presented findings from her PhD research dealing with the ***NGOization and politicization of aid in the context of Syrian displacement.*** She pointed out how the Syrian crisis introduced a new humanitarian market in Lebanon, with NGOs replacing the state to provide social services. Standards set out by international donors led to international NGOs overpowering grassroots organizations, and ultimately to the depoliticization of the action of aid and the legitimization of NGOs and the Lebanese government.

The second discussion confronted the current geopolitical context by questioning the panelists on the **implication of Russia's War in Ukraine for Lebanon and for the region**.

Firstly, panelists discussed the **impact that the conflict in Ukraine could have on Lebanon** in light of Russia's involvement in Syria. **Salam Kawakibi** (Centre Arabe de Recherches & d'Études Politiques Paris) put forward that everything which happens in Syria ultimately impacts Lebanon, and that, therefore, as long as there is no solution for Syria there will not be one for Lebanon. He argued that the Middle East is not considered by Western powers when attempting to find peace with Russia, even though Russia's most important military base outside its national territory is in Syria. Building on this, **Nadim Shehadi** stressed the responsibility of Western powers in the Syrian conflict. In this sense, he reminded the panel that the solution had to be both economic and political. Adding to this, **Makram Ouaiss** pointed out how energy was still a prime factor that complicated the solution for Syria as well as putting pressure on Lebanon to make concessions. Shifting the gaze back to the global, **Miriam Aitken** presented how the conflict in Ukraine could have a snowballing effect on Lebanon. Indeed, Russia's presence in Syria will evolve as Russia focuses its military efforts on Ukraine, and the change of Russian troop presence and geopolitical stand-offs with the West could impact ISIS' activity, Russia's fragile ceasefire with Turkey in Idlib and the renewal of cross-border aid into Syria.

In its second part, the discussion addressed **food insecurity and its link with conflict. Makram Ouaiss** put forward that there was acute hunger in Lebanon, and that the lack of food security, medication and vaccines will be a huge problem in the following years. **Salam Kawakibi** stressed that it was a misconception that food insecurity played the main role in the Syrian revolution and that we should not focus on this analytical gaze which diminishes the importance of demands of dignity and democracy. **Miriam Aitken** emphasized that Lebanon is particularly vulnerable to price shocks because of its reliance on imports and lack of storage capacity, which ultimately can exacerbate tension and violence. Finally, **Nadim Shehadi** explained how the concept of biopolitics applies to the current situation in Lebanon. During the Q&A session, **Tamirace Fakhoury** added to the panelists' analysis by putting forward that we cannot do simplistic causality in this case, and international powers are complicit by not holding Lebanese leaders accountable. Coming back to Syria, she presaged the normalization of Western ties with the Syrian regime which will allow it to once again tighten its grip. **Salam Kawakibi** and **Nadim Shehadi** both echoed this idea.

Photo Credit: Tamirace Fakhoury

To conclude the roundtable, the panelists were asked questions under the theme: **"Looking forward: Revisiting sectarianism, outlook, and prospect for Lebanon in 2030". Makram Ouaiss** offered his expertise on the **post-Thawra civil society landscape**. He argued that civil society and the emerging political groups have been perceived as a pathway to change especially after the recent May 2022 elections. Moreover, he highlighted the need to establish modern democratic political parties and the importance of the diaspora in supporting emerging actors, and the upcoming role of citizens in holding the newly elected politicians accountable. **Aya Majzoub** was questioned on the **possibilities for Lebanon to shift from a corrupt to a rights-based governance system**. She suggested that the first step toward this involves implementing the independence of the judiciary. Secondly, electoral law reform promoting a fairer system should be addressed. Finally, she stressed the role of the newly elected members of parliament in being the "eyes and ears" of the general public of what is happening in parliament. Overall, she reminded the panel that the international community needs to decide a clear path between continuing to legitimize Lebanese corrupt actors benefitting from the gridlock or putting pressure on these actors to act. She also argued that the first step toward accountability would be for the international community to help safeguard an independent investigation into the responsibility of the Beirut blast. Following on from this, **Nadim Shehadi** was invited to discuss **the potential of economic rescue plans**. He stressed the importance of reviving the special tribunal for Lebanon, as it represents the single most important instrument for Lebanon to get back on the right path. **John Nagle** was asked to **shift the gaze to broader lessons that we can learn from other divided societies and struggles.** He highlighted how Northern Ireland shows that ethnoreligious divisions continue to reconstruct themselves, making the system very resilient. In this sense, he proposed that we shift our analytical gaze from a power-sharing to an authoritarian lens to understand the Lebanese system. Finally, **Allison McCulloch** was invited to delve into how **consociational theory and policy studies can inform us on systems prone to immobilism**. She highlighted that

gridlock happens in all political systems and that a consociational system did not intrinsically make reforms impossible. Using theory to enlighten the case of Lebanon, she stressed the importance to start with small reforms as a pathway to wider agreements and greater political transformations.

Chloé Malvasio
Research Assistant to the Kuwait Chair

List of contributions (in order of presentation):

Introduction and welcome note:
Tamirace Fakhoury

Panel 1: Looking back: The history of Lebanon's power-sharing and its pathway towards collapse

Allison McCulloch
Conceptualizing Power-Sharing and its Dilemmas? A Case of Diminishing Returns?

Nadim Shehadi
Sectarianism is often in the eye of the beholder

Makram Ouaiss
Militiamen turned politician: how sectarian authoritarianism destroyed Lebanon

John Nagle
Protesting Power-Sharing: Placing the Thawra in Recent Waves of Contentious Politics

Alessandra Thomsen
An (In)escapable fate? Lebanon's endemic challenges and their manifestation in the Beirut blast

Panel 2: Human rights, refugee struggles and the international aid system

Aya Majzoub
The human rights landscape in Lebanon

Abby Sewell
Unwelcome Guests: Syrian refugees in Lebanon and the decision to stay, go or return to Syria

Clothilde Facon
NGOization and politicization of aid in the context of Syrian displacement.

Concluding remarks
Tamirace Fakhoury and Miriam Aitken

Diminishing Returns? Conceptualizing Power-Sharing and its Dilemmas

Allison McCulloch (Brandon University)

Consociationalism is a theory of institutional incentives that proposes that in divided settings, the concurrent adoption of four political institutions – grand coalition, proportionality, group autonomy, and veto powers – can deliver peace, stabilize politics, and mediate ethno-sectarian divisions. Extended periods of such cooperation are expected to lessen divisions, allowing the system to give way to more "normal" politics. Increasing evidence, however, tracks a different set of incentives. Rather than facilitating a virtuous cycle of cooperation and consensus, as the theory anticipates, a more vicious cycle of immobilism, intransigence and institutional collapse emerges. Indeed, many contemporary consociations embody a kind of 'crisis politics,' as in Lebanon. The country appears "stuck" with a set of institutions that have long outlived their usefulness, yet it seems incapable of moving beyond them. In this short intervention, I set out three power-sharing 'dilemmas' that explain this reversal of the theory's causal logic: immobilism, no-exit, and external actors, before considering the theory's adaptability and capacity for reform.

Recent events in Lebanon call into question the use of consociationalism as 'political prescription.'[1] From an unprecedented financial collapse – characterized by hyperinflation, an exodus of young people, gas and electricity shortages, and the loss or dramatic devaluation of life savings – to the devasting port explosion, the treatment of Syrian refugees, and the impact of the global COVID-19 pandemic, Lebanon is confronting 'concomitant crisis.' The power-sharing institutions are central to this state of affairs.

Yet, this 'concomitant crisis' sits at odds with consociationalism as a theory of institutional incentives for interethnic cooperation. The theory posits that in divided settings, the concurrent adoption of a grand coalition, proportionality, group autonomy, and veto rights will deliver peace, stabilize politics, and mediate divisions.[2] The logic works at two levels: representatives from ethnic majorities and minorities will govern together on matters of common concern and, on matters within a group's exclusive concern, each group will be able to have full decision-making competence. Extended periods of such cooperation are expected to lessen divisions, allowing the system to give way to more 'normal' politics. As Lijphart argues, with time, consociationalism can "render itself superfluous."[3] Increasing evidence from Lebanon and elsewhere, however, tracks a different set of incentives. Rather than facilitating a virtuous cycle of cooperation and consensus, as the theory anticipates, a more vicious cycle of immobilism, intransigence and institutional collapse emerges. Many consociations, including Lebanon, now appear 'stuck' with a set of institutions that have long outlived their usefulness, yet are seemingly incapable of moving beyond them.

In this short intervention, I outline three reversals to the theory's causal logic (see table 1) and

describe three dilemmas that follow from these reversals. Taken together, these developments suggest that consociationalism represents a case of diminishing returns. That consociationalism comes with a series of trade-offs is not a new claim. Scholars have highlighted a series of such dilemmas. Fakhoury highlights "dilemmas of democratization, peace, and social justice"; Agarin et al. analyze an 'exclusion amid inclusion dilemma'; McCulloch speaks of the 'exit dilemma.'[4] Stojanović and Raffoul respectively refer simply to the "dilemma of power-sharing" to suggest that power-sharing "helps to make peace in the short term, while complicating peacebuilding and reconciliation in the long term."[5]

Table 1: Reversals

Institutional mechanism	Original assumption	Reversal	Outcome[6]
Proportional representation -Reservedseats -Quotas -Funding allocations	Broad representation of communal groups will avoid 'majority dictatorship'/winner-takes-all outcomes and incorporate diverse voices in decision- making in pursuit of consensus ("depoliticizessegmental divergences")[7]	Deliberate politicization of contentious issues for the furtherance of sectarian leaders' positions; ethnic seepage into every 'nook andcranny' of state power; cultivates a 'culture of ethnicrepresentation'[8]	Sectarianization/ ethnicization
Segmental autonomy	"Good social fences make good political neighbors"[9]	A lack of coordination between the centre and the units or across units; rapid shifts in policy pronouncements; 'solo runs' by ministers	Fragmentation
Executive power-sharingVetoes	Grand coalitions will govern for all; protection of vital interests will defuse perceptions of threat and build trust	Policy inaction, e.g., parties declining to make public policy pronouncements; omitting issues from their party platforms; failing to sign or ratify domestic or international law; failing to reach agreement in coalition negotiations	Procrastination

The intersection of these incentive reversals in turn give rise to three interconnected dilemmas.

Dilemma 1: Conflict management or democratic government but not both?

Governments should be judged by "the success of that system in treating public problems"[10]; yet, in post-conflict consociations, citizens are frequently faced with an impossible choice: accept a system that has a reasonably strong record at ending violent conflict, but one in which a politics of immobilism tends to permeate the political arena. Key to the debate is that consociationalists often compare the present to the past ("things could be worse") whereas the present should be

compared not only to the past but also to the future ("things could be better"), suggesting different sets of standards by which power-sharing performance is assessed.

Dilemma 2: A transitional device without an exit
If consociationalism is a form of "necessary triage,"[11] then it should also have a plan for what comes after emergency responses (to continue the medical analogy, a 'step-down unit'). Yet, as Horowitz argues, "no one has specified the location of the exit."[12] This 'exit dilemma' stems from the fact that consociationalists have not yet effectively theorized the appropriate time at which to initiate the transition to a new arrangement, nor the process by which it unfolds or what that new arrangement might entail.[13] The exit dilemma is compounded by the alleged 'stickiness' of consociational arrangements (that is, such arrangements are "resistant to practically any reform").[14]

Dilemma 3: External actors simultaneously defuse and inflame crises
Over the last 30 years, most new consociations have had significant external involvement in the adoption and maintenance of their agreements. External actors can help power-sharing partners reach agreement and mediate moments of deadlock after implementation. These interventions can have an immediate dividend – helping to shore up peace and stability – but they can also create a 'vicious circle' where international involvement is continually "justified by claiming that consociationalism produces deadlocks."[15] In so doing, external actors relieve parties of the opportunity to (re)learn consensual and cooperative behavior: "things [go] wrong when political actors start to rely on foreign involvement to achieve their political aims."[16] Parties can maintain hardline stances, letting outside actors take the hit for what might be unpopular opinions with their base. Ultimately, this "leads to domestic dependency, incapacitating local politicians from taking political ownership,"[17] thus prolonging external involvement in daily politics.[18]

These interconnected dilemmas and the causal reversals that give rise to them suggest that consociationalism will eventually reach a point of diminishing returns. That is, having delivered short-term benefits in the realm of security and stability, a point is reached at which consociationalism cannot deliver further peace dividends, and in fact more consociationalism may be harmful to the very solution it seeks to realize. Central to any possible resolution to these dilemmas will be to maximize power-sharing's 'reform capacity'[19] and to seek strategies that can either help return power-sharing practice to its original theoretical assumptions or find institutional strategies that help divided societies move beyond power-sharing.

[1] John McGarry & Brendan O'Leary. 2007. "Iraq's Constitution of 2005: Liberal Consociation as Political Prescription." *International Journal of Constitutional Law* 5(4): 670-698

[2] Arend Lijphart. 1977. *Democracy in Plural Societies: A Comparative Exploration*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

3 Lijphart, *Democracy in Plural Societies,* p. 228.

4 Tamirace Fakhoury. 2019. "Power-sharing after the Arab Spring? Insights from Lebanon's Political Transition." *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 25(1): 9-26; Timofey Agarin, Allison McCulloch & Cera Murtagh. 2018. "Others inDivided Societies: A Research Agenda." *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 24(3): 299-310; Allison McCulloch. 2017. "Pathways from Power-Sharing." *Civil Wars* 19(4): 405-424.

5 Nenad Stojanović. 2008. "How to Solve the Dilemma of Power-Sharing? Formal and Informal Patterns of Representation in the Swiss Multilingual Cantons." *Representation* 44(3): 239-253; Alexandre Raffoul. 2019. *Tackling the Power-Sharing Dilemma: The Role of Mediation.* Report. Swisspeace.

6 For further discussion of these outcomes in the context of refugee governance, see Tamirace Fakhoury & Allison McCulloch. 2022. "Crafting Asylum Policy in Consociations: A Plausibility Probe of Lebanon's Response to the SyrianRefugee Crisis."

7 Lijphart, *Democracy in Plural Societies.*

8 Bassel Salloukh. 2019. "Taif and the Lebanese State: The Political Economy of a Very Sectarian Public Sector." *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 25(1): 43-60; Cera Murtagh. 2015. "Reaching Across: Institutional Barriers to Cross- Ethnic Parties in Post-Conflict Societies and the Case of Northern Ireland." *Nations and Nationalism* 21(3): 544–565.

9 Arend Lijphart. 2008. *Thinking about Democracy: Power-Sharing and Majority Rule in Theory and Practice*. Routledge.

10 Sarah A. Binder. 2003. *Stalemate: Causes and Consequences of Legislative Deadlock.* Brookings Institute

11 Brendan O'Leary. 2005. "Debating Consociational Politics: Normative and Explanatory Arguments." In Noel S (ed.),*From Power-Sharing to Democracy: Post-Conflict Institutions in Ethnically Divided Societies*. McGill-Queen's University Press.

12 Donald L. Horowitz. 2014. "Ethnic Power Sharing: Three Big Problems." *Journal of Democracy*. 25(2): 5-20, p.12.

13 McCulloch, "Pathways."

14 John Nagle. 2020. "Consociationalism is Dead! Long Live Zombie Power-Sharing!" *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 20(2): 137-146. On power-sharing's resistance to reform, see also Horowitz, "Ethnic Power Sharing" andJai Kwan Jung. 2012. "Power-sharing and Democracy Promotion in Post-civil War Peace-building." *Democratization*19 (3): 486-506. Jung, for example, argues "once power-sharing is agreed upon, it becomes difficult to make changes to the initial set-up."

15 Adis Merdzanović. 2017. "'Imposed Consociationalism': External Intervention and Power-Sharing in Bosnia and
Herzegovina." *Peacebuilding* 5(1): 22-35.

16 Kathia Légaré. 2018. "Transnational State-Building in Lebanon and Bosnia-Herzegovina: Strengthening or Shattering the Peace?" *International Peacekeeping* 25(1): 105-127.

17 Merdzanović, "'Imposed Consociationalism,'" p.23.

18 Allison McCulloch & Joanne McEvoy. 2019. "'Bumps in the Road Ahead': How External Actors Defuse Power-sharing Crises." *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 13(2): 216-235.

19 Johannes Lindvall. 2010. "Power-Sharing and Reform Capacity." *Journal of Theoretical Politics* 22(3): 357-376; John Nagle. 2016. "Between Entrenchment, Reform, and Transformation: Ethnicity and Lebanon's Consociational Democracy." *Democratization* 23(7): 1144-1161.

Sectarianism in the Eye of the Beholder

Nadim Shehadi

The Lebanese governance power-sharing system is the result of a long history, influenced by its Ottoman past. However, today, most reformists and politicians in the country are advocates for its replacement with a civil state. This brief reflection unpacks a series of stereotypical assumptions and questions about political change in Lebanon calling for a more in-depth and historical analysis of policy legacies and their connotations.

So, has Lebanon collapsed because of its sectarian system?
There is rich literature among political scientists about power sharing and consociationalism, sometimes referred to as consensus democracy (following the work of Arend Lijphart). Much of the literature refers to Lebanon's governance system as an example of consociationalism with modern characteristics that can help create consensus and reduce the intensity of divisions. There is also another strand of literature that frames the Lebanese power-sharing model through the lens of "sectarianism" with the underlying assumption that Lebanon needs to undergo a "desectarianization" process. However, power-sharing depends on the goodwill put into its implementation and on the eagerness to live together as a nation. As a result, the roots of the current Lebanese crisis lie in the lack of willingness of some parties to implement and support the system.

Against this backdrop, could secularism be an answer to Lebanon's crisis?
There is no easy answer to this question as the reasons that have led to the recent collapse of the Lebanese system are multidimensional. The debate on the reasons for Lebanon's collapse is often reduced to the binary financial vs political analysis with the former being predominant (*Hizb el Ponzi* and *Hizb el Ta3teel*). However, this provides a simplified explanation and overlooks longstanding processes at play. To put the debate in a broader historical perspective, political change is no linear process that can be addressed through quick fix solutions. Lebanon's collapse cannot be solely addressed by internal reforms without probing into the wider historico-political and geopolitical dimensions.

Power-Sharing did not save Lebanon from collapse, but did secularism do better elsewhere?
if in theory power-sharing in Lebanon was intended to decrease sectarian tensions, in practice, tensions are today on the rise. Yet by taking a wider look at the Middle East region, secularism and sectarianism have both failed. For comparativists and Middle East scholars, rethinking political models and their implications for ordinary people arises as a pivotal area for future research.

Militiamen turned politician: how sectarian authoritarianism destroyed Lebanon

Makram Ouaiss

Lebanon's post-war order saw the emergence of a political class that grabbed power by the barrel of the gun. This same class used sectarianism as its organizing principle to enter politics and as its final line of defense to escape all forms of accountability. Sectarianism and an authoritarian political mindset, backed in most cases by foreign patrons, defined the post-Taif era. Lebanon's collapse has been years in the making. A new popular and civic ferment is contributing to the emergence of political groups and actors that are determined to challenge the complete collapse of the state. How will traditional forces react and how successful will this new movement be is at the heart of how the Lebanon of the future will look.

Lebanon's current crisis has been years in the making and is primarily a political one. A young country, at the turn of the 20th century Lebanon was left by colonial powers with a consociational system that was expected to offer a model of confessional representation for its competing religious communities. Soon after independence however the country was placed under tremendous pressure from regional turbulence emanating from the Cold War and Arab nationalism and by the Arab-Israeli conflict which stunted its ability to develop and modernize. Dominated by feudal "Zaims" who wield power through their largess and their alliances with religious establishments and foreign powers, Lebanon's national identity has remained frail and its institutions weak.

The famous statement by Prime Minister Sa'eb Salam following the 1958 war "No victor, and no vanquished" pointed to the fragility of the system. The unequal distribution of power and resources combined with demographic shifts were a source of growing tension, resulting in clear demands for reform of the system and the revisiting of the National Pact of 1943. This unstable situation, combined with the arrival of militant armed Palestinian groups and other outside interference, divided the Lebanese further, and opened the door to a civil war. During the 1970s and 80s, this complex landscape would see the emergence of a new political elite composed of militia leaders who moved into power through the barrel of the gun to "protect" their communities.

This new elite turned politicians following the Ta'if peace agreement was authoritarian in nature, corrupt, and sullied by years of fratricide wars and war crimes excused by the self-declared amnesty law of March 28, 1991[7]. The new political elite also lacked a common national vision for a future Lebanon. From the outset they transformed the Lebanese political discourse into one grounded in sectarian fear and hatred of the other. While this discourse was instrumental to survival during war time it remains in use as a rallying cry when leaders are being held to account, or need to reassert their popular legitimacy. This discourse has

[7] The General Amnesty Law (law 84/91) was adopted by the Lebanese Parliament on 28 August 1991 absolving war-protagonists from crimes committed before March 28, 1991. "Lebanon: Human Rights Developments and Violations". Amnesty International. 8 October 1997.

systematically undermined Lebanon's values of democracy, justice, transparency, accountability, state building, and sovereignty.

Consociationalism is perceived by most scholars as prone to gridlock due to its very nature (Clifford and Romaniuk 2020, Nagel 2018, Fakhoury 2019, Salloukh et al. 2015). Dominated by a political elite conditioned by "zero-sum" thinking, Lebanon's consociational system has experienced repeated gridlock. The Doha Agreement negotiated by the elite to address the May 2008 conflict introduced the concept of the blocking third (*al telt al mou3atel*) which put the last nail in the coffin of Lebanese consociationalism.

Under the watchful eyes of the occupying Syrian army, the elite had entrenched itself and divided up, in an oligopolistic way, the windfall of Beirut's rebuilding and what was left of state institutions. It has also been responsible for gross political and economic mismanagement, state capture, nepotism, clientelism and a systematic targeting of reformists which has brought the country to its knees. As problematic, has been this elite's inability to imagine a modern, stable, democratic, and prosperous Lebanon for *all* its citizens.

Although valiant efforts were made to lay the foundation for a new Lebanon by more progressive forces in the 1990s and early 2000s, it was not until the ousting of the Syrian military that proponents of such a discourse began to organize more freely and openly. The past decade has witnessed further progress with the emergence of a new, vocal movement demanding change and a return to democratic values that Lebanon had for years struggled to hold on to.

In 2022, Lebanon is experiencing one of the three most severe economic crises on record of the past 150 years according to the World Bank. Wages have lost over 95% of their value due to ongoing currency devaluation, multi-dimensional poverty rates have reached over 80 percent, emigration is at an all-time high, and most public services have ceased or are delivered on a much reduced schedule.

The current elite claims to be fighting for "the rights of *the* community", but what is really meant is "their" religious community. They are fighting for their own followers, who are manipulated by their sectarian discourse, to make sure they get re-elected. The triumph of sectarian authoritarian leaders and their defense of "their" religious sects have come head-to-head with the most basic principles of nation building, leading to the virtual death of the Lebanese state building enterprise. At the first opportunity to engage in electoral reform in 2013 this elite ended up postponing elections three times. They have stood in the way of administrative decentralization, judiciary reform, meaningful financial reform, greater openness, accountability and transparency except when compelled by the international community. The authoritarian nature of the current elite makes it possible for the speaker of parliament to be in office for decades and to stall various aspects of parliament's work, for political parties not to hold internal party elections, and for parties to block the trial of those responsible for the Beirut blast. The sectarian nature of this leadership is used to escape accountability and to blame things on leaders of other sects.

But all is hopefully not lost. The emergence of new political groups over the past decade has gradually opened the door for a new type of discourse that is based on an alternative set of values to the ones held by the sectarian authoritarian rulers. And while this discourse is rooted in modern democratic values it needs to be amplified. Luckily more and more Lebanese are becoming sensitive to it, as witnessed by the 2016 local elections, the emergence of an anti-

establishment national campaign in the 2018 elections, and most recently in May 2022 the election of 13 reform minded members of parliament that represent this new movement. There is hope that the new political discourse will get traction and replace the sectarian discourse of the civil war. It is hoped that with time and support, emerging political groups will organize into democratic parties to bring to the fore a new way of doing politics and a generation of leaders that embraces the values of democracy, accountability, secularism and social justice.

Protesting Power-Sharing: Placing the Thawra in Recent Waves of Contentious Politics

John Nagle

Lebanon's 'Thawra' (2019) and Iraq's 'Tishreen' mobilization (2019), represent a wave of grassroots protest movements has emerged in postwar power-sharing societies. These protests are notable for several shared features in the context of deeply divided societies: leaderless and horizontal forms of egalitarian organisation; trans-sectarian participation; and for including a wide range of voices, including feminists, queer groups, and domestic workers. These protest movements are also linked by the issues that drive contentious politics: corruption, weak governance, youth unemployment, poor public services, gender inequality and LGBTQ rights. Yet, despite these seemingly discrete set of issues, protests in Lebanon and Iraq have distilled these problems into a broader narrative of opposition to the logic of power sharing. Thus, while Tishreenis have declared 'No to muhasasa, no to political sectarianism', Thawra protestors stated 'the people want the downfall of the sectarian regime'. Protestors have further demanded the overthrowing of ethnosectarian elites: 'all of you means all of you' ('kellon ya'3ni kellon') was shouted in Lebanese protests as an 'outright rejection of the entire sectarian political class'.
Yet, while these protest movements have developed powerful 'injustice masterframes' to delegitimize power-sharing and ethnosectarian elites, the question is how best to achieve strategic goals? I develop three broad overlapping categories to capture strategic dilemmas and choices: Transformationist, Reformist, Inclusionist. Transformationist approaches cohere to revolutionary contentious politics that seek to overthrow power-sharing; Reformist captures attempts to achieve discrete reforms from government, especially in terms of electoral reform, corruption, and the provision of public goods; Inclusionist characterises efforts to enter into and work within the power-sharing system, particularly through the formation of protest political parties.

In exploring these strategic forms, I ask what outcomes have these protest movements effected. Despite important consequences, I draw attention to the panoply of coercive and hegemonic practices used by ethnosectarian elites to delegitimize protest movements in the three cases, including state and non-state violence and rhetoric to frame protestors as threats to peace or as agents of foreign actors.

The Thawra and Tishreen protests emerged at the same time in October 2019. Although the immediate triggers for protests in Lebanon and Iraq differed, the protests are notable for several shared features in the context of consociational power-sharing: leaderless and horizontal forms of egalitarian organisation; trans-sectarian participation; and for including a wide range of voices typically marginalized in power-sharing systems, including feminists and LGBTQ groups. A relatively broad set of common and interlocking issues have driven protest: corruption and weak public services, sectarianism, unemployment, and human rights. Yet, despite these seemingly discrete set of issues, protest actors have distilled them into powerful 'injustice masterframes' (Benford 2013), narratives and practices that entail blame attribution on authorities cast as illegitimate. In particular, protest activists have identified power-sharing and ethnosectarian elites as the main focus for oppositional and revolutionary politics.

Protestors in Iraq chanted, 'No to muhasasa, no to political sectarianism', and 'muhasasa is at the heart of all our problems'. Similarly, in Lebanon's Thawra, activists led chants that 'the people want the downfall of the sectarian regime' ('al-sha`ab yurid isqat el nizam al-ta'ifi'). Ethnosectarian elites were targeted in both protests as 'robbers', 'thieves', and as forms of poison and toxins to the body politic: 'they are just killing the country', said one activist. In Lebanon, 'All of you means all of you' ('*kellon ya'3ni kellon*') was shouted in protests epitomizing the outright rejection of the entire sectarian political class'.

As protest activity has diminished in intensity, Tishreenis and Thawrites confront core issues of what goals to formulate and what strategies are required pursue to advance objectives. Three broad overlapping protest vectors can be identified: *Transformationist*, *Reformist*, *Inclusionist*. Transformationist approaches cohere to revolutionary contentious politics that seek to overthrow power-sharing; Reformist captures attempts to achieve select policy reforms from power-sharing governments; Inclusionist characterises efforts to enter into and work within the power-sharing system, primarily through the formation of protest political parties.

Yet as a significant body of research and indeed the empirical record starkly illuminates, the capacity of non-sectarian actors to leverage change to their advantage is chronically limited by power-sharing as a hostile environment for non-sectarian politics (Nagle 2016, Fakhoury 2019). A paradox is thus evident: the thing that protest movements in Lebanon and Iraq seek to overthrow or change – power-sharing – is at the same time the immovable object which closes down possibilities for change (Salloukh et al 2015). There are good reasons for suspecting consociational power-sharing for doing this from an institutionalist and instrumentalist perspective. Power-sharing elections encourage ethnic outbidding which incentivizes leaders to instrumentalise voters from their sect. Identity rather than valence politics dominates in such environments. Power-sharing systems, based on mutual vetoes, are dysfunction, are prone to paralysis and ineffectual when it comes to legislative change (Nagle 2020). Finally, consociationalism provides distinct problems in relation to the human rights for individuals and groups that do not define themselves in ethnosectarian terms. Thus, it is rare to find strong rights in consociational formats for sexual minorities, migrants, women, socialists and individuals that simply disidentify from ethnicity (Nagle 2016).

Yet, while consociational power-sharing provides significant barriers for non-sectarian politics in Lebanon and Iraq, I argue that a fuller explanation we need to understand how power-sharing intersects with 'competitive authoritarianism' (Levitsky and Way 2002; 2010): regimes where competitive multiparty elections occur but the system is tilted to create an uneven playing field between government and opposition. As the originators of competitive authoritarianism explain: 'Although elections are regularly held and are generally free of massive fraud, incumbents routinely abuse state resources, deny the opposition adequate media coverage, harass opposition candidates and their supporters, and in some cases manipulate electoral results' (Levitsky and Way 2002: 53).

Thus, in Lebanon and Iraq, while power-sharing contracts opportunities for non-sectarian opponent groups to gain access to the system, in reality the utilisation of the tools of competitive authoritarianism severely delimit the possibility for opposition to mobilize. Competitive authoritarianism has not been systematically used to analyse consociationalism (see Dodge 2013). Competitive authoritarian regimes are typically moulded in the guise of a dominant party headed by a populist leader. Power-sharing systems, alternatively, are plural frameworks forged through a grand coalition of ethnosectarian elites who represent their respective 'communal'

segments (McCulloch 2014). To address this gap, I adapt competitive authoritarianism to the framework consociationalism.

Consociationalism meets Competitive Authoritarianism
To understand systemic issues regarding how ethnosectarian factions maintain power and exclude non-sectarian groups, we need additional explanatory tools. Levitsky and Way's (2002; 2010) conceptualisation of '*competitive* authoritarianism' is useful. Competitive authoritarianism describes states where multiparty competitive elections take place in conjunction with state control of media, electoral abuse, and the capture of state resources through corruption. Such states are competitive in the sense that elections are environments for political contestation, but they are not fully democratic because the playing field is heavily skewed against opposition parties. Control of the media, abuse of state resources, coercion, and/or limited fraud give entrenched elites an unfair advantage over the opposition. Instead of banning the opposition and closing down their media, competitive authoritarians use a range of tactics to restrict the oxygen for opposition movements to operate. Competitive authoritarian regimes, for example, manipulate electoral rules or use clientelism for vote getting; they control the mainstream media and seek to co-opt independent media; and rather than simply control legislatures, they make them toothless. Rather than see competitive authoritarian regimes as transitioning to full democracy, they are specific types of systems with the potential to either stabilise, expedite or regress democratization.

A proviso is required, however, for applying competitive authoritarianism to consociationalism. Competitive authoritarian regimes are typically characterised by a dominant party helmed by a populist leader who rules through personalized power. Power-sharing systems, by their nature, are hydra-like, they are made of a coalition of ethnosectarian parties, none of whom can dominate the state to the exclusion of others. To address this, I modify competitive authoritarianism to the context of consociationalism by emphasising two distinguishing features: (1) where ethnosectarian parties manipulate and interfere with democratic process to maintain dominance within their respective segments against rival intraethnic competitors; (2) how leading parties use the system, including building interethnic alliances across factions, to deliberately delimit the capacity of non-sectarian groups to contest and access political power. There are identifying features of what I label 'competitive consociational authoritarianism': the use of quota systems – formal or informal - to guarantee ethnosectarian representation in government thereby limiting the space for opposition; electoral engineering and vote manipulation to allow ethnosectarian factions to dominate elections; the extraction of public services via corruption which are used for patronage politics; ethnosectarian controlled media networks to disseminate propaganda in conjunction with attempts to co-opt or coercively control non-sectarian opposition.

When consociationalism interacts competitive authoritarianism, I argue that the result is a hybrid system that furnishes highly constrained openings for non-sectarian actors to press claims. Granted, Lebanon and Iraq's consociational system is rooted in electoral democracy and there is space for independent media space that theoretically offers various access points for opposition groups. Yet, power-sharing is a closed system in which power circulates within a limited section of ethnosectarian elites. The manipulation of the electoral system – not just vote buying and patronage networks but voting rules - render it highly difficult for protest parties to win seats. Deadlock in the executive functions of power-sharing further winnows the prospect for protest actors to have new laws and policies passed. Elite level decision making is made through processes of informalisation and behind closed doors, often featuring unelected figures, thus representing additional forms of exclusion to social movements. Power-sharing

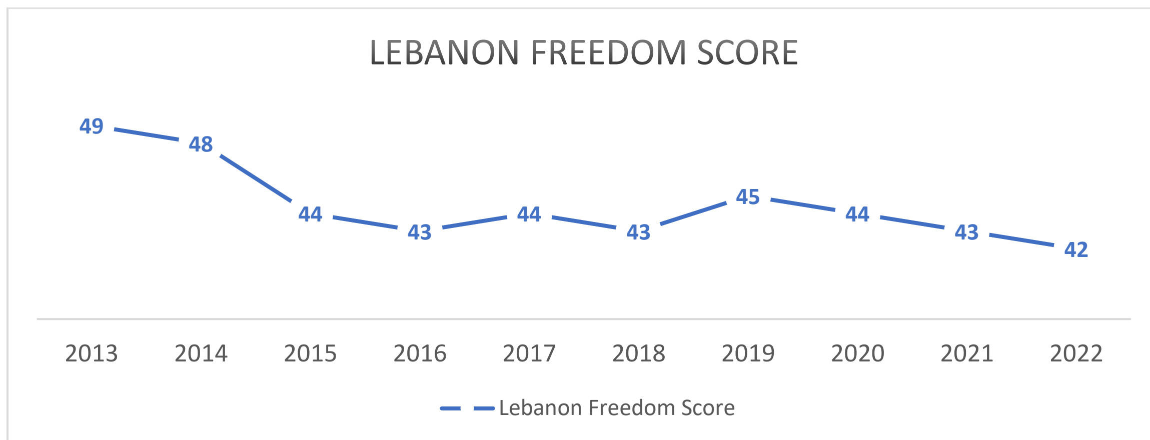
elites deploy a vast array of technologies and devices to prohibit challengers, ranging from the legal apparatus, state and non-state security and militias to crush protest, and they own powerful media networks to delegitimate opposition.

Turning specifically Lebanon, we can see that the key features of competitive authoritarianism are increasingly evident. While elections are largely free, credible allegations of pervasive vote buying and political interference in elections have been recorded. A report by the EU's Electoral Observation Mission noted that the 2022 power-sharing elections 'were overshadowed by widespread practices of vote buying and clientelism, which distorted the level playing field and seriously affected the voters' choice' (EU 2022). The main ethnosectarian parties harness patronage networks to incentivize and effectively buy voters (Cammett 2014) by offering them public sector jobs or cash in return for votes (Mansour and Khatib 2021: 22). Even when electoral reform introduced proportional representation and preferential voting in 2017 to theoretically encourage independent candidates, the incumbent parties collaborated to ensure that the districts were still drawn along communal lines to their advantage and also allowed private organizations and foundations to promote coalitions and candidates, which increased advantages accorded to ethnosectarian factions (Freedom House 2020). Power-sharing has resulted in a symbiosis of the ethnosectarian political elites and their private sector allies in a way that has rendered the state an instrument for self-enrichment and reinforced clientelistic politics (Merhej 2021). Lebanon is ranked 156 out of 180 countries for corruption. The ethnosectarian elites who run powerful ministries hand out lucrative contracts to private companies either owned by themselves, their families or allies (Transparency International 2022). According to one major report: 'Lebanon's sectarian political system is, by its nature, conducive to widespread corruption' (Merhej 2021: 6).

Equally important for understanding the processes through which ethnosectarian factions reproduce their power is the dispersed nature of governance. The role of producers and distributers of public infrastructure are essentially devolved to 'informal' actors, especially sectarian networks that operate in the blurred lines betwixt political parties and militia groups, and for this reason governance exists in 'hybrid' forms (Fragonese 2019). Informal networks tied to ethnosectarian factions have thus assumed leading roles in providing security and policing, healthcare, electricity and gas, and waste management and social security (Cammett, 2014). In the wake of a disintegrating social contract, many citizens are reliant on the informal sphere of sectarian networks for basic services (Salloukh 2019; Mansour and Khatib 2021). This informalisation is further evident in the mediascape. While freedom of expression and freedom of the press are guaranteed by law, the main ethnosectarian each have their own media networks and Lebanon's independent media platforms are owned by prominent families with ties to the country's political elites (El-Richani, 2016).

Lebanon's postwar consociationalism has thus exacerbated 'wicked problems' in relation to sectarian polarization, weak formal governance structures, and poor human rights. At the same time, ethnosectarian factions manipulate the system through corruption and patronage politics, orchestrating the voting process, controlling the media landscape and through exercising power through informal actors mixing clientelism and violence. It is for these reasons that Lebanon is classified by Freedom House as 'partly fee' and hybrid – an electoral democracy but lacking the full attributes of liberal democracy – marked by further democratic backsliding in recent years. It's score on Freedom House's measurements have significantly declined since 2013 (see **Table 1**). In 2022 Lebanon was downgraded in the Economist's Democracy Index (EDI) from a 'Hybrid Regime' Authoritarian Regime 'partly as the power of interest groups related to Lebanon's sectarian political system continued to grow'.

Table 1



Freedom House, Lebanon, 2013-22

Conclusion

Consociationalism in Lebanon and Iraq is an unpropitious political opportunity for structure for non-sectarian groups to mobilize and achieve change. Yet, the institutional framework of consociationalism does not fully explain the constricted sphere for non-sectarian political movements to make sustained challenges. Instead, we need to add competitive authoritarianism as an explanatory variable. In competitive authoritarianism, elections regularly occur allowing opposition groups to contest incumbent parties, but the system is rigged by elites to ensure their continued dominance: they interfere with elections, use corruption and patronage networks, co-opt, delegitimise and use violence against opposition parties and protest movements.

Non-sectarian opposition movements find it hard to thrive not only because of institutions, or because citizens prefer to identity with their sect-based communities, but because the space for them to mobilize is chronically bounded. Research on divided societies analyses how ethnosectarian group identities are socially constructed or instrumentalized by political leaders to access power. This perspective needs to be set along its obverse side: elites and factions retain power by destroying diversity, by brutally demobilizing non-sectarian identities and politics. As a You Stink activist explained: 'The movement did not fail. it was forced to fail by the government. Let's not ignore the context we are in, how far the government or politicians are willing to go to destroy these movements'.

The literature on competitive authoritarianism indicates that these regimes are unstable and infused with 'internal tensions'. The contradictions inherent in competitive authoritarianism may limit opposition challenges but not 'without provoking massive protest or international repudiation'. This is especially the case when major shocks strike, such as Lebanon's economic crisis in 2019. Protest movements have achieved changes: reforms, government resignations, and won parliamentary seats. They have articulated 'blame assignation' of power-sharing and its elites, and established prefigurative politics that foster new models of inclusive and civic communities that supersede narrow sectarianism.

What can be done to allow non-sectarian movements greater chance to leverage change? Scholars have typically promoted the palliative qualities of liberal over corporate systems. Liberal consociations, as Lijphart argues (2008), facilitate the 'emergence of non-ethnic and non-religious parties'. As a classic example of the pitfalls of corporate consociationalism,

leading scholars recommend that 'what Lebanon needs is liberal consociation rather than no consociation'. Yet, I ask a provocative question: would pushing Lebanon to a liberal system afford better opportunities for non-sectarian parties to break through? Drawing on evidence, I suggest that this is an unlikely panacea since ethnosectarian factions would continue to skew the system to their benefit. Patronage networks, corruption and clientelism, and informalisation, would likely still be used by factions to subvert a liberal framework. Systemic change requires not only reforming the corporate characteristics of power-sharing but dealing with endemic issues of ethnosectarian authoritarianism.

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An (In)escapable fate? Lebanon's endemic challenges and their manifestation in the Beirut blast

Alessandra Thomsen

On 4 August 2020, a massive explosion tore through the port of Beirut as hundreds of tons of improperly stored ammonium nitrate exploded. The tragic blast left more than 200 people dead, 6,000 injured and a quarter of a million homeless. For a moment, it seemed that the disaster – now labeled the third worst non-nuclear explosion in history – would force a moment of reckoning in Lebanon. Yet, over eighteen months later, the country is even worse off than it was on 4 August 2020. Today, Lebanon is in free-fall, propelled by a series of cascading crises that have fueled debates about whether it is on the brink of becoming a failed state. Lebanon's collapse has also raised the question of whether its entrenched sectarian power-sharing formula is inescapable.
This presentation intends to highlight how Lebanon's sectarian power-sharing system entrenches recurring dilemmas that have perpetually undermined political change and meaningful reform. The three dilemmas that will be discussed include: the proneness of its power-sharing formula to political deadlock, its institutionalization of impunity, as well as its veritable disconnect from grassroots demands. Particularly, this talk seeks to showcase how these dilemmas have manifested in the lead-up to, and aftermath of, the Beirut port explosion by drawing on the thirteen-month political stalemate that paralyzed the country from August 2020 to September 2021, the failing domestic investigation, as well as the ever-widening chasm between elite-led politics and politics from below.

On 4 August 2020, a massive explosion tore through the port of Beirut as hundreds of tons of improperly stored ammonium nitrate exploded. The tragic blast left more than 200 people dead, 6,000 injured and a quarter of a million homeless. For a brief moment, it seemed that the disaster – now labeled the third worst non-nuclear explosion in history – would force a moment of reckoning in Lebanon. Yet, over twenty months later, the country is even worse off than it was on 4 August 2020. Today, Lebanon is in free-fall, propelled by a series of cascading crises that have fueled debates about whether it is on the brink of becoming a failed state.
Lebanon's collapse has particularly raised the question of whether its entrenched power-sharing formula is inescapable. This presentation will highlight how Lebanon's sectarian power-sharing system entrenches recurring dilemmas that have perpetually undermined political change and meaningful reform. The three dilemmas that will be discussed include: the proneness of Lebanon's power-sharing formula to political deadlock, its institutionalization of impunity, as well as its veritable disconnect from grassroots demands.
The focus of the talk will be to showcase how these dilemmas converged and manifested in the lead-up to – and aftermath of – the tragic Beirut port explosion. Indeed, contrary to what Lebanese citizens and the international community had hoped, the blast did not produce the change or reforms necessary to save Lebanon. Instead, it starkly highlighted the system's immobility and proneness to political deadlock, its culture of impunity, as well as its utter disconnect from grassroots demands.

Dilemma One: ***Immobilism and political deadlock***

The tragic explosion that tore through the port of Beirut on 4 August 2020 can be traced back to the first recurring dilemma rooted in Lebanon's sectarian power-sharing system, namely its inherent immobility and its political leaders' negligence. Not one of Lebanon's sectarian parties was willing to take responsibility nor possessed the ability to decisively act on the presence of highly explosive materials in Beirut's port, a fact that was known for more than seven years. Lebanon's power-sharing systems' proneness to political deadlock was also tragically highlighted in the aftermath of the explosion, whereby the country was – as many times in the past – paralyzed by a crippling 13-month deadlock following the resignation of now ex-prime minister Hassan Diab. During the deadlock, Lebanon's ruling establishment proved incapable of putting their interests aside to form a new government – despite ever-worsening financial and humanitarian crises. Instead, sectarian factions fought over control of the interior ministry, which oversaw the recent parliamentary elections in May 2022, as well as the justice ministry, which is playing a role in the ongoing domestic investigation into the port explosion.

Ultimately, the lack of a functioning executive for over one year – coupled with Hezbollah's three-month boycott of cabinet meetings after a government was finally formed – significantly undermined progress on overdue reforms, causing the country's multifaceted crises to deepen significantly.

Dilemma Two: ***Impunity politics and a failing domestic investigation***

Lebanon's second recurring dilemma, namely the sectarian power-sharing system's institutionalization of impunity, has also dramatically manifested in the aftermath of the Beirut blast. Shortly after the tragic explosion, a domestic investigation was launched to uncover the causes of the blast and hold those responsible to account. Yet, almost two years later, the Lebanese probe into the blast is yet to provide answers about who was responsible. In fact, the embattled efforts of different judges to investigate have come to symbolize the sectarian political system's entrenched culture of impunity, which systematically shields the country's governing elite from accountability. Particularly, the capacity of the executive to influence the judiciary – coupled with the quasi immunity granted to political leaders – have worked together to actively undermine justice and accountability for the Beirut port explosion.

Dilemma Three: ***An elite-led system divorced from grassroots demands***

The gap between elite-led power-sharing and the politics from below has also become ever-visible in the almost two years since the tragic explosion. This widening gap has been reflected in the political system's perpetual failure to respond to even one of the demands made by the international community – or Lebanese citizens – since the tragic explosion. In the aftermath of the blast, international donors, including the IMF, pledged aid that was conditional on a series of reforms, ranging from a comprehensive restructuring of the country's financial sector to tackling the fundamental problem of weak governance. Meanwhile, Lebanese citizens have also made a number of demands for reform, including a reform of the electricity sector and of Lebanon's banking system, as well as accountability and justice for the Beirut blast.

Nonetheless, since the explosion, Lebanon's sectarian power-sharing system and particularly the rulers that dominate it have systematically failed to address any of these demands. Instead, they have relied on a "wait-and-see attitude" and resorted to "stop-gap measures" that have not only deepened Lebanon's multifaceted crises, but also shrunk the margin for addressing them. Indeed, two years into the country's crippling economic meltdown – and more than one and a half years after the port explosion – Lebanon's leaders have yet to decide on steps to confront the country's cascading crises, let alone agree on a credible roadmap toward reform.

In presenting the ways in which Lebanon's political systems' entrenched dilemmas have manifested and converged in the aftermath of the Beirut port explosion, this talk will also reflect on the implications this has had on citizen well-being. Drawing particularly on Lebanon's failing public services – from healthcare, to education, to water and electricity – this presentation will conclude by showcasing the ways in which Lebanon's sectarian power-sharing system has shaped and impacted Lebanese citizens' lives.

The human rights landscape in Lebanon

Aya Majzoub

The Lebanese authorities' corruption and failure to address the massive political and economic crises that the country is facing have resulted in the most drastic deterioration of rights in decades. The impact of the economic crisis on residents' rights has been catastrophic and unprecedented. Almost 80 percent of Lebanon's population now lives under the poverty line, unable to access basic goods, including food, water, healthcare, and education. The pandemic compounded the poverty and economic hardship, disproportionately affecting marginalized groups, including low-income families, people with disabilities, migrants, LGBTQ people, and refugees. Yet, Lebanese authorities have stubbornly refused to carry out any reforms to mitigate the impact of the crisis, and they have repeatedly delayed promised social protection plans.

Politicians from across the political spectrum scapegoated refugees for the economic crisis, leading to discrimination, harassment, violence and hate speech against refugees. The government continues to pursue policies designed to coerce Syrian refugees to leave, and the acute economic crisis and staggering inflation have made it exceedingly difficult for refugees to afford the most basic necessities; 90 percent of Syrian families in Lebanon live in extreme poverty, relying on international assistance and increasing levels of debt to survive.

Although the Lebanese government continues to publicly state its commitment to the principle of non-refoulement, it has deported more than 6,000 Syrians since 2019. Syrian refugees who returned to Syria from Lebanon between 2017 and 2021 faced grave human rights abuses and persecution at the hands of the Syrian government and affiliated militias.
My intervention will outline the discriminatory and arbitrary policies that the Lebanese government has adopted against refugees, the impact that these measures have had on refugees' realizations of their rights, as well as the pitfalls of the international aid that HRW has documented.

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Unwelcome Guests: Syrian refugees in Lebanon and the decision to stay, go or return to Syria

Abby Sewell

This talk will address the paths available to Syrian refugees in Lebanon: returning to Syria, attempting to move on to Europe or elsewhere (often by dangerous smuggling routes), and remaining in a collapsing Lebanon. I will discuss the dynamics at play when refugees decide which path to take, how the calculus has changed amid the crisis in Lebanon and the changing dynamics in Syria, and the implications for Lebanese society more broadly as well as for the refugees themselves

There are currently some 839,000 registered Syrian refugees in Lebanon. The actual number in the country is unknown, however, because the Lebanese government requested UNHCR to stop registering new refugees as of 2015. The often-cited estimate of 1.5 million actually present in the country has been repeated by authorities for the past six years, while the number of registered refugees recorded by UNHCR has decreased by more than 300,000, from a high of nearly 1.2 million in 2015.

The paths available to refugees who want to leave Lebanon at this point are three: return to Syria, get resettlement in another country through UNHCR or other legal routes, or attempt to reach another country illegally through smuggling. Since the economic crisis in Lebanon and the global COVID-19 pandemic, the number of resettlement cases and returns to Syria have dropped, while the number of people seeking to leave via smuggling have increased.
One frequently hears calls in Lebanon — often from political leaders — for the refugees to "go back to their country." In fact, before the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to an extended closure of the Lebanese/Syrian border, an increasing number *were* going back. UNHCR has recorded 69,420 refugees who have voluntarily returned to Syria from Lebanon since 2016. In 2019, the peak year for returns, UNHCR recorded more than 22,000 "voluntary returns" of Syrian refugees from Lebanon. This included people who joined return trips organized by Lebanese General Security — which would register those interested in going back, then communicate with Syrian authorities to ensure that they were not wanted for arrest, and transport the returnees by bus to the border — as well as those who went back on their own and whose return was reported to UNHCR. As of last year, however, the number of returns reported had decreased to about 3,600.

At the time of the General Security-organized trips, many returnees cited the expense of living in Lebanon and inability to make ends meet as their main reason for going back. In some cases, families would split up, with the young men of compulsory army service age remaining in Lebanon, while women, children and elders would go back to Syria.
However, since then, a number of factors have led to people being less willing to return. In the first place, COVID-19 put a stop to cross-border traffic — at least at legal crossings, although traffic on smuggler routes never stopped — and although the border has reopened, General Security has not resumed its return trips. In the second place, the Syrian government now requires Syrian citizens entering the country to exchange US$100 for Syrian pounds at the

border at the official exchange rate, which, as in Lebanon, is much lower than the black market rate. This serves as a financial disincentive to returning. Thirdly, it has been documented by a number of human rights groups that refugees who returned to Syria have faced arrest, interrogation and harassment by Syrian authorities, and in some cases torture and death in detention.

Finally, as Lebanon has fallen into an economic crisis, Syria has as well, and today the economic situation and living conditions in Syria are arguably worse than in Lebanon.
Given that return is not a viable option for many and living conditions in Lebanon have significantly deteriorated, many refugees are looking to Europe.
In the early years of the Syrian conflict, refugees had a greater chance of resettlement through legal routes. In 2016, more than 18,000 Syrian refugees in Lebanon were resettled in other countries by way of UNHCR. In 2020, amid the COVID-19 border closures, the number dropped to a low of less than 4,300, which only increased slightly in 2021, to about 6,000. Given that the conflict in Ukraine has led to a new wave of refugees in Europe, there is no reason to think that there will be more places available for refugees from Syria in the near future.

With legal routes largely stopped, those able to scrape together the means to pay a smuggler are leaving Lebanon by illicit routes. The most well-known, of course, is from Lebanon to Cyprus by sea, and then continuing on to mainland Europe. In April, a boat sank off the coast of Tripoli while being pursued by the Lebanese Army, resulting in seven people confirmed dead and 33 still missing, many of them Lebanese citizens.
In 2021, at least 1,570 people were recorded by UNHCR as having left Lebanon via "irregular boat departures," compared to 270 in 2019. Despite an increase in Lebanese passengers, most of them are still Syrian – 72% of those recorded in both 2021 and 2022 to date. Most of the vessels have been either intercepted by the Lebanese Army or returned by Cypriot authorities, and some of the Syrian passengers who were sent back to Lebanon by Cypriot authorities were then deported to Syria.

Meanwhile, in the face of increasing efforts to block the Cyprus route and deportations of those who attempted it, refugees have turned to other routes to leave Lebanon. Some have gone overland through Syria by way of Idlib — still an active conflict zone — to reach Turkey and then Europe. Some have flown to Libya in hopes of going by sea to Italy. (Some of those ended up stuck in Libya, imprisoned and exploited by gangs). Last year, many flew to Belarus, which was readily handing out tourist visas to Syrians, Iraqis and Afghans, among others. They would then cross into the EU via the land border in Poland or Lithuania. A number of refugees died of hypothermia in the forest between Belarus and Poland.

The desire of refugees to get out has also led to a wide range of scams, from "smugglers" who take their would-be passengers' deposits and run, to people posing as UN officials taking payment for resettlement, to kidnapping schemes that lure people in with the promise of travel. It is clear that the majority of refugees would prefer to get out of Lebanon (as, perhaps, would a majority of Lebanese), and their ability to do so is largely limited by finances. It is also clear that the majority do not see return to Syria as an option. Thus, for the foreseeable future and grandstanding by Lebanese politicians notwithstanding, those without the means to get to a country they deem more favorable are going to stay in Lebanon.

NGOization and politicization of aid in the context of Syrian displacement.

Clothilde Facon

This paper reflects on the links between the state, NGOs, and the aid sector in Lebanon. I posit that this country is a microcosm of issues belonging to the phenomenon of NGOization, referring to a form of institutionalization, professionalization and depoliticization of social action. Lebanon has witnessed a trend towards NGOization with the devolution of welfare functions and core responsibilities from the state to aid actors. These organizations work towards apolitical goals, mainly humanitarian and development projects. Their depoliticization is further reinforced by the fact that the aid system is crossed by structural inequalities and premised on the power of a small group of United Nations agencies and international NGOs. In this context, national NGOs have had to adjust their missions to suit donor preferences, and this co-optation has side-lined their contextual expertise.

I approach NGOization as a political process as it gives the impression that NGOs are filling the vacuum left by the complete absence of custodians of the public good. I also emphasize that there is a strong economic component to this phenomenon: it creates a parallel economy, which has expanded with the current crisis. The expansion of this third sector has encouraged social and economic polarization and the development of a multi-speed society. It has co-opted part of the Lebanese population, deterred from engaging in politics or militant activities.

In this context, CSOs working for reforming the political system through advocacy or policy-making – in policy areas such as independence of the judiciary, rule of law, or constitutional and electoral reform – lack visibility and leverage. Their efforts to shape and strengthen the public sphere from below have been hindered by a number of structural obstacles, in particular the absence of political space to deploy their advocacy efforts, as the decision-making is extremely centralized and authoritarian in nature. Further, their space of operation has been shrinking, with a legal grey zone facilitating governmental control over their operations.

I also assess the role of international aid institutions on the continuity and durability of the Lebanese state and its neo-patrimonial and clientelist governance mode. International entities such as the UN, the IMF and foreign donors – in spite of their willingness to pursue a 'principled aid' approach – have been accused of reinforcing clientelist and sectarian interests. In this view, international financial assistance has led to the strengthening and anchoring of the political system and its entrenched institutional manifestations. Thus, I appraise the legitimizing role of international aid on existing power relationships, as well as the 'balancing act' of international institutions to remain independent from clientelist and profiteering logics.

This presentation focuses on the politicization and depoliticization dynamics pervading the aid sector in the context of Syrian displacement. It aims to assess the impact of foreign aid on the perpetuation of the status quo in Lebanon, as well as on the fabric of the civil society.

My first argument is that Lebanon is a microcosm of issues belonging to the phenomenon of NGOization. By NGOization, I refer to a form of institutionalization, professionalization and depoliticization of social action. According to the critical scholarship on NGOs, there is a strong

synergy in the spread of neoliberalism in the late twentieth century and the rise of the NGO sector. Indeed, Lebanon has witnessed a trend towards NGOization with the devolution of welfare functions and core responsibilities from the state to aid actors, a tendency only increased by the current multidimensional crisis. These organizations work towards apolitical goals, mainly humanitarian and development projects.

On the one hand, I approach NGOization as a political process as it gives the impression that NGOs are filling the *vacuum* left by a structurally missing state. It creates a situation where citizens are accustomed to functioning without the state; thus, it defuses political anger by framing as assistance what people should have by right. This overall framework contributes to the prevalence of a charity approach that further reinforces sectarian and communal reflexes rather than a civic spirit. On the other, I emphasize the economic aspect of NGOization. Indeed, this process encourages the development of a parallel economy: the Syrian crisis has introduced a new humanitarian market to the country, with international actors that have established a monopoly on the coordination efforts and coopted national NGOs. The expansion of this economic fabric has fostered social and economic polarization and the development of a multi-speed society, giving economic opportunities to expatriate employees and to a small part of the Lebanese population, with the ultimate consequence of deterring these from engaging in politics or militant activities.

However, NGOs are not a monolithic phenomenon. They have access to different levels of resources and have different abilities to shape political discourses. In particular, a few CSOs are dedicating their efforts to reforming the political system through advocacy or policymaking, in policy areas such as independence of the judiciary, rule of law, or constitutional and electoral reform; among them, I include organizations such as the Legal Agenda, Helem or Kulluna Irada. However, these lack visibility and leverage: their efforts to shape and strengthen the public sphere from below have been hindered by a number of structural obstacles, in particular the absence of political space to deploy their advocacy efforts, as the decision-making in Lebanon is extremely centralized and authoritarian in nature. Further, their space of operation has been shrinking, with a legal grey zone facilitating governmental control over their operations. Thus, the current system widely favors apolitical NGOs or 'service-oriented' NGOs over CSOs who fight for political change.
The depoliticization of NGOs is further reinforced by the fact that the aid system is crossed by structural inequalities, as it is premised on the power of a small group of United Nations agencies and international NGOs. In this context, national NGOs have had to adjust their missions to suit donor preferences, and this co-optation has side-lined their contextual expertise.

The second part of my presentation aims to assess the role of international aid institutions on the continuity and durability of the Lebanese state and its neo-patrimonial and clientelist governance mode. International entities such as the UN, the IMF and foreign donors – in spite of their willingness to pursue a 'principled aid' approach – have been accused of reinforcing sectarian interests. In this view, international financial assistance has led to the strengthening and anchoring of the political system and its entrenched institutional manifestations. Thus, I appraise the legitimizing role of foreign aid on existing power structures, as well as the 'balancing act' of international institutions to remain independent from clientelist and profiteering logics.

I argue that depoliticization is a key modality of foreign interventions concerning Syrian refugees in Lebanon; it structures their discursive space and leads to their legitimization. By depoliticization, I posit that actions resulting from political decisions are framed as apolitical

and/or as neutral. Indeed, the transnational governmentality of refugees contributes to rendering the issues it tackles devoid of political substance by treating them under a technical angle, under the guise of neutrality. These depoliticization practices are targeting the Lebanese state itself, by promoting a reified vision of Lebanon, and in particular set in motion the dual paradigms of crisis and resilience. They have structured a continuum of significations and political labelling around ideas of state weakness, absence, and fragmentation, of a constantly crisis-stricken state legitimizing massive foreign interventions, and of the country's ability to rebound from these crises. This image of Lebanon as a weak country plagued by sectarian divisions and chronic incapacity suffers the effects of an essentializing lens, which deciphers local political processes on the basis of allegedly immutable categories of identity, and ultimately silences a perspective on political economy.