Lebanese Democracy: Battered, Flawed, and Unmatched in the Arab World

but the objective was to secure elections and political party activity, limited political liberalization, with some Arab regimes implemented authoritarianism. From the 1980s, Ottoman or European hegemony and North Africa, new Arab states elsewhere, in the Arabian Peninsula the mid-20th century before the competition flickered briefly in trajectories. In Syria, Iraq, Jordan, apart from Lebanon, the modern pluralist discourse.

Lebanon already had half a century of experience of council elections and politics evolved to accommodate the pre-existing social reality of popular identification with various Muslim and Christian sectarian communities, each with its own leaders and preoccupations. The communities crystallized in medieval times, between the Islamic conquest of the Levant in the 640s and the Ottoman overthow of the Egyptian Mamelukes in 1517. It distorts history to represent Lebanese sectarianism simply as a product of 19th-century European interventions.

Out of the late 19th-century Ottoman autonomous province and French mandatory tutelage in the 1920s and 1930s the modern Lebanese state developed its eccentric confessional democracy, to balance the interests of the sectarian communities ("confessions"), mediated through their bourgeois elites. The balance has been a product of power relations and elite manipulation, has never been fully fair, and its operations ossified sectarian compartmentalization. Some of the imperfections were not absent from 20th-century Western democracies. It is more important to remember that the confessional democracy of mid-20th century independent Lebanon became the bedrock of flourishing civil liberties, vociferous political debate, successive parliamentary elections involving genuine competition, and repeated constitutional transfers of presidential and government authority. After the mid-1950s, the contrast with the rest of the Arab world was like that between day and night. Lebanon’s tolerance and openness, however, made Lebanese democracy vulnerable to disruption, especially from Lebanon’s unsympathetic neighborhood. The country's geographical centrality in the Middle East and its position on the Arab-Israeli front line attracted the predatory attentions of Arab regimes, and freewheeling Lebanese politics eased their penetration. After the June 1967 Israeli defeat and humiliation of the Arabs, political activation of the large Palestinian refugee population in Lebanon interacted balefully with Lebanese Muslim grievances about the Maronite advantage in Lebanon’s domestic affairs. The new Syrian Baathist regime, as it consolidated its power in Damascus in the early 1970s under Hafiz al-Asad, looked to command its Lebanese flank against both Israel and other Arabs. The modern Syrian state was not reconciled to Lebanon’s existence, as indicated by Syrian refusal of diplomatic relations between Damascus and Beirut. In the 1970s, a combination of Palestinian armed assertion, Israeli military intrusion, Syrian interference, conflicting Lebanese communal responses, and Lebanese regime incompetence brought large-scale violence and degradation of the Lebanese state.

The eclipse of Lebanon’s confessional democracy, with no truly free parliamentary elections between the last poll before the war years in 1972 and the first poll after the lifting of Syrian Baathist hegemony in 2005, lasted three decades. Fifteen years of mayhem were succeeded in 1990 by fifteen years of subjection to Baathist Syria, one of the authors of Lebanon’s wartime miseries. It is a tribute to the resilience of Lebanon’s deep pluralist traditions that a free press, a dynamic civil society, and a functioning parliament survived the dark decades, with multi-communal cohabitation, can show the Arab East a brighter political future. If Lebanon’s post-2004 democratic revival founders because of continuing assault by the Syrian dictatorship and the outcome will be little hope for democratisation in the Arab Levant.
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04

To re-emerge in good order in the early 21st century.

After renewed independence in 2005, Lebanon remains what it was when it initially gained its independence in 1943: a multi-communal country with no majority community in which sectarian diversity colors national identity. Confessional democracy can also be a way station, within which the Lebanese become sufficiently integrated to proceed to a non-communal framework. However, the persistent absence of large cross-sectarian political parties indicates that practical democracy is not yet separable from communal sensitivities. Overall, Lebanon’s reconciliation of representative government with its communal compartments is a precious counterpoint to the notion that autocracy is the best form of political practice in the fractured Middle East.

It is worth reviewing the long, difficult development of Lebanon’s confessional democracy, because the historical record indicates the depth and magnitude of the investment in political pluralism, and the high level of the stakes in the early 21st century. Lebanon’s democracy remains a work in progress, riddled with imbalances, corruption, patron-client networks, and poor accountability, but it is by light years the most inclusive and participatory political system in the Arab world. Its resurgence since 2005 does not deserve to be massacled by the steady, cunningly modulated attrition coordinated from Damascus against it.

**Foundation of Confessional Democracy, 1860-1943**

Mount Lebanon’s formal autonomy within the Ottoman Empire, extracted by the European powers in the early 1860s, was a bid to stabilize the rural hinterland of Beirut after almost two centuries of Maronite Catholic expansion, increasingly impinging on the dominant Druze clans. Druze clan chiefs led a distinctive mountain community that emerged out of Ismaili Shiite Islam in the early eleventh century. European intervention, with a French landing near Beirut, followed the 1860 Druze victory over the poorly organized Christians, involving widespread massacres of Christian villagers. The events culminated escalating interplay of Maronite peasant rebellions against Maronite and Druze lords encouraged by the Maronite church, Druze and Muslim resentment of increasing Christian wealth, and defensive coalescence of Druze chiefs and peasants. Successful stabilization involved an innovative representative institution – a council elected from single and multi-member districts with sectarian allocations roughly aligned with population. This had antecedents stretching back to 1845 multi-communal advisory councils for the qa’im-maqams (administrators) of Mount Lebanon. The style of representation after 1864 set the pattern for subsequent confessional democracy. In functions, including a veto power over tax increases, and electoral arrangements, the council of the autonomous province was qualitatively different from other Ottoman provincial councils.

The council advised the governor, a Christian appointed from elsewhere in the empire, on the domestic affairs of Mount Lebanon, the geographical core of modern Lebanon. A Christian majority of seven out of 12 members reflected in subdued fashion the Christian 80 percent of the population. In the arrangement the dominant Maronite community came out a little badly – despite amounting to nearly 60 percent of Mount Lebanon’s inhabitants, Maronites received four council seats, the largest communal bloc but only one-third of the total. Druze, Shiites, and Sunnis received seats somewhat above their demographic shares. Each constituency male residents (20 percent). The trend since a 1921 census indicated that the Christians could only operate in the context of solid data regarding the demographic balance of the communities. The 1932 census showed a razor-thin Christian majority of 51 percent in Greater Lebanon, with the Maronites as the largest of the three major communities (29 percent), followed by the Sunnis (23 percent) and the Shiites (20 percent). The trend since a 1921 survey indicated that the Christians would soon lose their edge, but the numbers gave interim legitimacy to the Maronite political advantage.

Second, France organized population counts, including a full-scale census in 1932. Multi-communal pluralism could only operate in the context of solid data regarding the demographic balance of the communities. The 1932 census showed a razor-thin Christian majority of 51 percent in Greater Lebanon, with the Maronites as the largest of the three major communities (29 percent), followed by the Sunnis (23 percent) and the Shiites (20 percent). The trend since a 1921 survey indicated that the Christians would soon lose their edge, but the numbers gave interim legitimacy to the Maronite political advantage.

By the 1930s, the presidency was a virtual Maronite preserve.

Full elaboration of modern Lebanon’s confessional democracy took place between 1920 and 1943, under French Mandatory rule. France, which had long-standing special relations with the Maronite Catholics of Mount Lebanon, took advantage of the Ottoman collapse in 1918 to extract a mandate from the new League of Nations to control the area of modern Lebanon and Syria, theoretically to guide the local obligation to fulfill the terms of the mandate, a duality that gave rise to all sorts of tensions.

France contributed fundamental elements to modern Lebanon. First, in September 1920, in coordination with leading Maronites, France enlarged the Ottoman province of Mount Lebanon into a “Greater Lebanon” that pulled in the coastal cities of Beirut, Tripoli, and Sidon, populations to independence and representative government. To some degree, the mandate was colonialism under new vocabulary, but France was nonetheless under an explicit obligation to fulfill the terms of the mandate, a duality that gave rise to all sorts of tensions.

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Greater Lebanon was intended to be a viable territorial platform for a Maronite dominated state, but in fact it established a political entity with no majority community. Mount Lebanon with Beirut could have become a Maronite dominated state; Greater Lebanon could only function on the basis of multi-communal pluralism, with a tentative Maronite primacy. The French adjusted to this reality more quickly than the Maronites, and sought to build the large Sunni and Shiite Muslim populations of the newly incorporated districts into enlarged representative institutions.

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From 1861 to 1914, Lebanon was at peace, as it had been for most of its history, the one notable exception being the period between 1860 and 1861 and, in particular, the civil war of 1860. By 1861 peace reigned, Lebanon had been reconquered, and its factions learned to live together in relative harmony, a harmony that lasted until the end of the Ottoman Empire.

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The Beqaa Valley to the east, and rural districts in the northern and southern extremities of the coastal mountain range. This created today’s Lebanese territorial boundaries.
distribution. Up to 1934, according to for all seats, whatever the sectarian (universal male suffrage) would vote in any constituency, all voters allocation of seats pioneered in the multi-communal laws defining more elaborate chamber parliament, with electoral amendment established a single-majority of the chamber of deputies. It major of the chamber of deputies via an electoral college, and to stay indefinitely in Beirut, and itsoscillation between flexibility and high-handedness in dealing with Lebanon’s political bosses. By the mid-1930s, many Sunni politicians of the coastal cities, who strenuously opposed their incorporation into Lebanon through the first fifteen years of the Mandate, became habituated to Greater Lebanon. Their Arab nationalism became tempered by enjoyment of political influence that they could not expect in a Greater Syria ruled from Damascus. France guaranteed the Sunni elite the basis of the 1926 Constitution in independent Lebanon proceeded on the basis of the 1926 Constitution operated according to the unwritten 1943 “National Pact” among Khoury, al-Sohl and other politicians. Under the pact the president would be a Maronite, the prime minister a Sunni, and – an afterthought precipitated by Shiite protests – the parliamentary speaker a Shiite. British General Edward Spears introduced the idea of splitting parliamentary seats between Christians and Muslims (including Druze) according to a 6:5 ratio. The Maronite president would retain preponderant executive authority and appoint the Sunni prime minister, but in reality could not exercise effective authority except in partnership with a prime minister enjoying the confidence of the Sunni Muslim community. The marginal Christian advantage in parliament did not mean much because governments depended on support from multi-sectarian blocs of deputies mobilized by shifting alignments of communal bosses (zu’ama – singular za’im).

Vigorous political pluralism within and among the communities characterized mid-20th century Lebanon. This was not simply a matter of electoral competition and generally peaceful transfers of power. It also involved an ethos of dynamic, free public debate and organizational activity beyond the state, which both the political class and most of the population conceived as having only limited command of society. The ethos grew naturally out of the strengthening cosmopolitanism of Beirut and the Maronite assertion in Mount Lebanon through the 19th century. In the mid-20th century it supported the flourishing diversity of the Lebanese media and an elaborate range of autonomous civil society groups, from professional guilds to the social underpinnings for democracy, the more so in the 1960s and early 1970s as the media and civil society in Syria and Iraq passed under Baathist dictatorship. Confessional democracy could be a rough game. President Bishara al-Khoury manipulated state patronage, client networks, and alliances of za’uma to gain a parliamentary majority in the 1947 elections sufficient to override the constitution in favor of a second presidential term. Busting the constitutional six-year
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French High Commissioner Henri Gouraud, ranked by the Maronite Patriarch and the Grand Mufti, declares the formation of the State of Greater Lebanon on 1 September 1920.

In February 1958, neighboring Syria joined Egypt in the United Arab Republic (UAR), under Nasser’s command. Lebanese Arabist fervor for Lebanon to submit to Nasser soared, and spurred Christian apprehension.

From 1952 to 1958, under President Camille Chamoun, the basic compromises of the National Pact came under strain. Chamoun faced mainly Muslim demands that Lebanon join the pan-Arab trend led by Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt, thereby abandoning the understanding that Lebanon would balance between the Arab world and the West. The president raised the temperature by tilting toward the West, Sunni Muslims also questioned the Christian-Muslim demographic balance and privileged Christian access to administrative appointments in violation of the constitution. Chamoun gave the vote to women in 1951 elections. In 1952 his prime minister deserted him because of Khoury’s corrupt practices and attempts to muzzle the media. When the army commander refused to intervene against street protests, Khoury had to resign. Democracy prevailed.

Chamoun tried to find an exit from frustration with his own manipulation of 1953 and 1957 parliamentary elections – gerrymandering constituency sizes and boundaries to undercut opponents, and pressure flexibility of the political class that the division was contained within a framework of civilian politics and fierce but peaceful debate for years – until external pressures became overwhelming.

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Limit was an unfortunate precedent to be set by the republic’s first head of state. Nonetheless, Khoury was genuinely popular for several years, even if this received exaggerated reflection in the 1947 vote, and his attempt to rewrite political rules led to his demise. Leading politicians, including Maronite presidential aspirants, turned against him, the press became hostile, and he barely retained a parliamentary advantage in the 1951 elections. In 1952 his prime minister deserted him because of Khoury’s corrupt practices and attempts to muzzle the media. When the army commander refused to intervene against street protests, Khoury had to resign. Democracy prevailed.

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command. Lebanese Arabist fervor for Lebanon to submit to Nasser soared, and spurred Christian apprehension. Chamoun asserted Lebanese independence, but suspicion that he wanted to precipitate Western intervention to emulate Khoury in securing a second term cost him dearly. A majority of the elite was against him, including the Maronite patriarch, and for many it had little to do with Arabism. The creation of the UAR, however, brought Lebanon to the brink of violence, and in May it went over the brink with the killing of an opposition Maronite journalist. Chamoun’s government lost control of the country beyond Mount Lebanon, and only a fortuitous U.S. military landing in Beirut because of the July 1958 coup in Iraq ended the fighting.

American mediation to step back. The establishment of a resolution satisfactory to public opinion in both main camps and the swift recovery of the political system demonstrated the underlying strength of multi-communal pluralism. Chamoun served out his term until late 1958 and then departed, avoiding any disruption of the constitution. Maronite army commander Fouad Chehab became president as a civilian to widespread acclaim, having studiously kept the military out of the domestic conflict. Chehab promised reform to answer Muslim discontent, and opted for a decade-long relationship with Nasser while firmly guarding Lebanese independence. Chamoun’s presidency thus ended with a second peaceful transition of executive authority and reaffirmation of the National Pact.

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Chehab’s mild reformism recognized the trend. He mandated implementation of the constitutional provision for Muslim-Christian equality in administrative appointments. He also massively increased state spending in social infrastructure and development projects in the Shiite rural areas. The measures were obvious precursors to a political debate on modest
recalibration of shares in confessional democracy, meaning Muslim-Christian equality in parliament, attention to the Shiite deficit, and adjustment in the relative powers of president, prime minister, and parliamentary speaker. In the event, limited recalibration was delayed twenty years, until the 1989 Taif Accord. Externally provoked inflation of Lebanese politics again intervened from the late 1960s, this time so dire as to bring 15 years of warfare on Lebanese territory after 1975, with comprehensive paralysis of the Lebanese state.

Whether or not communal bosses would have had the maturity to recalibrate the confessional system in the 1970s if Lebanon had been less squeezed from outside is an open question. Without such maturity there would have been a domestic crisis and breakdown sooner or later. There was the complication of other demands – Druze leader Kamal Jumblatt wanted sectarianism taken out of Lebanese democracy so that a Druze like himself was not blocked from accessing top state offices. It was a fair demand, certainly to Western ears, but Lebanese realities were and are unlike realities in most Western societies – the communities were and are real foci of interests, and real political compartments.

On the one hand, in view of the hostility Chehab’s methods and policies aroused in much of the Christian and Sunni elite by the early 1960s, it is easy to be skeptical about the flexibility of confessional spiritual and political leaders. Sadr was a respected religious figure and could deliver his community, regardless of social ferment and the influence of the radical left among the Shiites. Most Shiites simply wanted a fair deal, and their relative deprivation was a blot against confessional democracy. The essential point is that after the 1967 Arab-Israeli war Lebanon never had the chance to adapt its democratic affairs, and we shall never know what might have been achieved.

Chehab’s impetus to increase the social role of the state and to address sectarian and geographical imbalances aroused a fierce debate that itself demonstrated robust pluralism. Chehab carried over scorn for civilian politicians from his military past. He resorted to officer friends, technocrat advisors, and military intelligence (the so-called Deuxième Bureau) to bypass the prime minister and government and to get sympathizers into parliament in the 1964 elections. Lebanese civilian politics, however, were not so easily corralled. Through the 1960s, Maronite politicians with significant followings – Chamoun, Pierre Gemayel, and Raymond Edde – opposed Chehab’s bigger state and military intrusion in civilian affairs. Chehab also alienated leading Sunnis, especially his first prime minister, Saeb Salam. The pattern of Khoury and Chamoun thus repeated itself in other communities, and had excellent personal relations with Maronite leaders.

The coup de grace was the 1970 presidential election. This was a fair reflection of wider public disillusion with a stalled and seamy Chehabist machine. The coup de grace was the 1970 presidential vote. Conservative and leftist forces, supporters and opponents of Lebanon’s laissez-faire outlook on society, joined in parliament to defeat the Chehabist candidate and elect Sulayman Franjieh from the conservative opposition, by a margin of one vote. Franjieh cut back military intelligence, Lebanon’s eyes and ears, and terminated the activist state. He proved incompetent in coping with Palestinian weaponry, the machinations of his friend Hafez al-Assad, Syria’s tough new master, and the sectarian splintering of the Lebanese elite as Lebanon became an Israeli-Palestinian front. Nonetheless, the crucial turning point toward chaos preceded Franjieh. It was the surrender of state sovereignty by President Helou and army chief Emile Boustanly in Palestinian refugee camps and areas along the Lebanon-Israel border to armed Palestinian factions through the November 1979 Cairo Agreement.

Whatever the implications, Franjieh’s election was a peaceful transfer of power: Lebanon’s changing political blocs. The 1972 parliamentary poll expressed confessional democracy warts and all, but without notable presidential interference. Urban and rural bosses mobilized clients, and manipulated clan loyalties. About 54 percent of eligible voters participated in this jamboree, comparable to turnout in present-day America. The multi-sectarian lists in multi-member constituencies – 99 seats from 26 districts – indicated a degree of multi-sectarian cohesion. Results for an array of factions and small parties reflected the will of a populace used to influence peddling and communal segmentation. In the early 1970s, Lebanon shone as a bright light of freedom in a region submerged in autocracy.

**ECLIPSE 1976 - 2005**

Lebanon’s constitutional apparatus persisted through the dark years of violence, militia cantons, and foreign military interventions between 1975 and 1990. Three presidencies came and went on schedule, the 1972 parliament renewed itself repeatedly, and multi-communal governments succeeded one another. Democratic politics, even the peculiar Lebanese variety, were of course impossible in the absence of law and order. The democratic ethos in society, however, lived on. Beirut continued to host the most diverse publishing and media activities in the Arab world. In the late 1980s, unions and other associations, including women’s groups, protested in the streets against military tyranny, demanding restored central democratic authority.

Popular sentiment and mobilization, expressed through Lebanon’s still dynamic civil society, gave critical momentum to General Michel Aoun’s drive to terminate militia rule and Syrian occupation in 1988-1990. Aoun, who was Lebanon’s Maronite army commander from 1984 to 1990, drove a chain of events that brought the post-1975 war period to an end. However, the events led not to renewed democracy and independence but to recovery of state authority under Syrian hegemony. Aoun lacked the capability to prevail when he took his brigades to war against Syrian forces in 1989 and against Lebanon’s largest militia, the Christian Lebanese forces, in 1990. Instead, the paroxysm of violence brought American and Arab intervention in favor of giving Syria a mandate to control and “stabilize” the Lebanese.

To function at all, even under Syrian hegemony, Lebanon needed an updated constitutional understanding among its communities. The Arab League and the United States sponsored a meeting of surviving 1972 parliamentary deputies in the Saudi town of Taif in October 1989. On the positive side, the deputies agreed constitutional amendments that would allow confessional democracy to develop once Lebanon recovered its independence. First, the Taif accord shifted main executive power from the Maronite president to the multi-communal council of ministers, chaired rather than commanded by the Sunni prime minister. Second, it replaced the Christian advantage in parliament with Christian-Muslim equality, also enhancing the authority of the Shiite parliamentary speaker. In any case, because a significant number of Christian deputies are elected in Muslim majority constituencies, and therefore reflect Muslim politics, too much should not be read into continuing nominal Christian overrepresentation. Third, the Taif accord explicitly provided for dialogue on ending confessional allocations at some indefinite future date.

On the negative side, the deputies agreed to an open-ended Syrian...
military presence in Lebanon and to “distinctive” Syrian-Lebanese relations. Special treaties would follow to implement “coordination and cooperation.” There was no word on the minimal mutual respect of establishment of diplomatic relations as part of “distinctive relations” – Lebanon was to be a protectorate of Syria. The United States, as a patron of the Taif accord, must bear primary responsibility for what followed – 15 years of Lebanon’s subjugation to a foreign dictatorship. The outcome was particularly insulting to the country in that it coincided with the liberation of Eastern Europe.

Lebanon only acquired a government with the capability to reconstruct infrastructure and improve the economy in late 1992, after Syria found its clients dangerously incompetent and impoverished economies across the region. In October 1992, Syria imposed the Brotherhood Treaty overrode the Lebanese constitution, strengthening its grip on the Shiite third of the population. Syrian military intelligence and its Lebanese security associates cracked down on public dissent, mainly from Christian followers of the now-exiled General Aoun, with detentions, abductions and torture, documented in detail by Human Rights Watch.

In both 1992 and 1996, Syrian military intelligence oversaw predetermined results in the parliamentary polls, with a respected al-Nahar journalist observing that Syria deserved an Oscar for systematic manipulation. The West exhibited little concern: U.S. ambassador Richard Jones expressed the “pleasure” of his country with “a very interesting” opening round in the 1996 parliamentary elections, despite the blatant rigging of the Mount Lebanon vote. Whenever Hariri tried to exercise a little political autonomy, in security arrangements for southern Lebanon or relations with the West, Syrian President Hafiz al-Assad summoned and rebuked him. Nothing illustrated the Syrian regime’s contempt for Lebanon’s institutions more than its abuse of the remodeled Lebanese presidency. Between 1989 and 1998, it suited Syria to downgrade the Maronite president to give more space to Sunni and Shiite leaders. In 1995, Assad personally overrode the Lebanese constitution to extend the term of the pliable Elias Hrawi, observing: “I don’t see altering one or two clauses as being of such great importance to justify debate.” In 1998, it suited Syria to transplant the role Hariri intended without such outcomes. For the medium-term, however, Hariri accepted that he had to adapt to Syrian supremacy in security affairs and to the venality of Syrian officials and their Lebanese sidekicks. He had no choice. The United States steadfastly backed Syrian control of Lebanon, and Israeli bombardment, most notably in 1993 and 1994, relentlessly inflated Syria’s ally Hezbollah, and strengthened its grip on the Shiite third of the population. Syrian military intelligence and its Lebanese security associates cracked down on public dissent, mainly from Christian followers of the now-exiled General Aoun, with detentions, abductions and torture, documented in detail by Human Rights Watch.

For Syria, Hariri’s reconstruction project achieved enough by 1998 for Lebanese economic viability under Syrian hegemony. The Syrian priority shifted to conclusive containment of Lebanese civilian politics, including Hariri, with real authority in the hands of a battery of security agencies under President Lahoud and Syria’s military intelligence chief in Lebanon. From 1998 to 2000, Hariri was out of office, and Lahoud’s security apparatus oversaw a vindictive campaign against the former prime minister and his aides, even accusing Hariri of colluding with Israel by scheming to have the army curb Hezbollah. Lahoud and his partners, however, proved by 2000 that they had nothing productive to offer the Lebanese people, and efforts by Syrian military intelligence and Lahoud to manipulate the 200 parliamentary elections against Hariri backfired badly.
The elections in August-September 2000 came when Damascus was preoccupied with its own presidential transition from Hafez al-Assad to his son Bashar after the death of the former on 10 June. In addition, the then-head of Syrian military intelligence in Lebanon, removed by Bashar al-Assad in 2002, did not have good personal relations with the Lebanese president. The vote showed that in such conditions the Lebanese popular mood might still kick. The security apparatus, however, could not allow such a precedent to stand.

Unlike his father, who floated above Lebanese factions as long as they behaved, the new Syrian president, Bashar al-Assad, picked sides in Lebanese politics. He aligned himself with Lahoud and Hezbollah secretary-general Hassan Nasrallah, and treated Hariri coldly. Lahoud devoted himself to sabotaging Hariri’s economic policies, and the security machine devoted itself to cracking down on an increasingly diverse opposition.

Israel’s May 2000 withdrawal from southern Lebanon under Hezbollah pressure raised questions about the justification for Syria’s overbearing military and intelligence presence around Beirut and in much of Lebanon. Druze leader Walid Jumblatt joined Maronite patriarch Nasrallah Sfeir in defiance. In April 2001 the Syrians moved troops into Jumblatt’s fiefdom in the Shouf district, and in August Lahoud’s security apparatus arrested hundreds of Christian activists, Joumouists and others, while President Assad sent extra forces across the border. Prime Minister Hariri complained that he knew nothing about these moves. In October 2003, Hariri had a nasty experience in Damascus when Assad presided over a kangaroo court at which Syrian officials accused the prime minister of working against Syria.

With the U.S.-led invasion and occupation of Iraq in March-April 2003, and an unprecedented American assertion of “democratization” in the Middle East, the ruling Assad family and its entourage in Damascus were determined to lock down Lebanon once and for all. Bashar al-Assad played the dangerous game of confronting the U.S. presence in Iraq, in order to force the Bush Administration into a regional bargain with his regime. By mid-2004 the Sunni Arab jihadist insurgency in Iraq, plainly encouraged by Damascus, and American difficulties with Iraqi Shiites, particularly Muctada al-Sadr, gave Assad confidence of expanding room for maneuver.

Locking-down Lebanon against any challenge on Syria’s western flank involved yet another infraction of the Lebanese constitution, to extend President Lahoud’s term beyond its November 2004 termination, hence maintaining presidential cover of the security apparatus. Coercing Hariri and the Lebanese parliament into approving such an outrageous move would humiliate both. A triumphant Syrian-Lebanese security machine would then be in a powerful position to manipulate results in parliamentary elections postponed until May 2005, because of the presidential issue. Assad duly summoned a resistant Lebanese prime minister to Damascus on 27 August 2004, and flatly ordered him to have the Lebanese government and parliament override the constitution in favor of Lahoud.

The Syrian ruling clique overreached. In an angry response to Assad’s brushing aside their appeals that Syria not dictate Lebanon’s presidential affairs, the United States and France sponsored UN Security Council resolution 1559 of 2 September 2004. The resolution required removal of all foreign forces from Lebanon, a Lebanese presidential election free of foreign interference, and disbandment of all remaining private armies on Lebanese territory — read Hezbollah’s armed wing and Syria’s Palestinian clients. Baathist Syria’s inflated strategic self-importance led it to gamble recklessly, inaugurating a crisis that has still not reached a resolution in late 2008, but which produced a reassertion of Lebanese democracy amid a Syrian campaign to abort this reassertion.
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Neither Prime Minister Hariri nor a majority of the Lebanese public took their humiliation by Bashar al-Assad easily, and the intervention of the international community encouraged surging waves of protest in Beirut. President Lahoud got his three-year extension, assisted by death threats against parliamentarians. Vicious condemnations of Lahoud across a wide part of the communal spectrum evidently unnerved the security machine. The 1 October 2004 attempted assassination of the Druze politician Marwan Hamade, who resigned his ministerial post to protest the Lahoud extension, began what became a long series of political murders and murder attempts. Hariri resigned and quietly dedicated himself to an opposition victory in the May 2005 parliamentary elections, which could have seriously challenged the Syrian presence in Lebanon.

On 14 February 2005, Hariri was assassinated in a massive truck bombing that killed more than 20 people. In the aftermath, Bashar al-Assad’s friends and opponents in Lebanon respectively mobilized their crowds on 8 and 14 March, in demonstrations that also reflected their crowds on 8 and 14 March, in Lebanon respectively mobilized al-Assad’s friends and opponents of mid-20th century confessional democracy in important respects. Most notably, three clearly defined blocs with recognizable distinct orientations sought parliamentary seats, in contrast to the amorphous jostling of personalities, patronage networks, and loose factions that dominated before 1975. Hariri’s son Saad and Walid Jumblatt led a “14 March” grouping with cross-sectarian Sunni, Christian, and Druze backing that emphasized independence, civilian political preeminence, and economic liberalism. General Michel Aoun, returned from exile and feeling sidelined by “14 March”, headed a separate bloc based on his Free Patriotic Movement, which campaigned against “corruption” and put forward the most systematic reform policy document hitherto seen in Lebanon. The Shiite bloc of Hezbollah and Amal reiterated the importance of “resistance” against Israel. Their grip on a Shiite community that still felt left behind, including in parliamentary seating, was overwhelming. The election results broadly reflected the weight of the three blocs, as indicated by the March demonstrations. The “14 March” grouping took a modest majority of 72 out of 128 seats. Aoun and allies took 21 seats in the Christian heartland, reflecting pent-up Maronite frustration. Hezbollah and Amal gathered 35 seats, including Christian allies in Shiite majority constituencies. At more than one-quarter of parliament this was as fair a representation as the Hezbollah-led group would have gotten in Western elections.

Otherwise, the election process received intensive, unprecedented attention from international and local monitors. There were problems with unfair constituency boundaries that were legacies of the 2000 election, but there was little prospect of a properly agreed new electoral law without dangerously lengthy postponement of the poll. The top priority in the charged environment was to produce a properly representative parliament as quickly as possible. The monitors all judged the elections generally free, fair, and appropriately conducted. The Aounists complained of “14 March” abuses, but they got results they never could have dreamed of under the Cedar Revolution, 2005

Lebanon Renaissance Foundation

On 14 February 2005, after leaving the House of Parliament in downtown Beirut, which he was responsible for rebuilding, a car bomb targeted his convoy killing him and 22 others. His assassination was the spark of the Independence Uprising, where a month later on 14 March more than a million Lebanese took to the streets to demand the truth about the assassination and an end to the Syrian military occupation.

The “Cedar Revolution” also involved a special association of Lebanon with the international community, because it went hand in hand with global disgust regarding the Hariri murder, expressed in establishment of the UN’s first ever murder inquiry, under Security Council Resolution 1595 of 7 April 2005. Lebanese and international pressures together forced a resentful Syrian regime to pull its troops and visible intelligence operatives out of Lebanon by the end of April 2005.

Lebanon thus emerged from three decades of suspended democracy. The May-June 2005 parliamentary poll, the first free of foreign steerage since 1972, was an improvement on those of mid-20th century confessional democracy in important respects. Most notably, three clearly defined blocs with recognizable distinct orientations sought parliamentary seats, in contrast to the amorphous jostling of personalities, patronage networks, and loose factions that dominated before 1975. Hariri’s son Saad and Walid Jumblatt led a “14 March” grouping with cross-sectarian Sunni, Christian, and Druze backing that emphasized independence, civilian political preeminence, and economic liberalism. General Michel Aoun, returned from exile and feeling sidelined by “14 March”, headed a separate bloc based on his Free Patriotic Movement, which campaigned against “corruption” and put forward the most systematic reform policy document hitherto seen in Lebanon. The Shiite bloc of Hezbollah and Amal reiterated the importance of “resistance” against Israel. Their grip on a Shiite community that still felt left behind, including in parliamentary seating, was overwhelming. The election results broadly reflected the weight of the three blocs, as indicated by the March demonstrations. The “14 March” grouping took a modest majority of 72 out of 128 seats. Aoun and allies took 21 seats in the Christian heartland, reflecting pent-up Maronite frustration. Hezbollah and Amal gathered 35 seats, including Christian allies in Shiite majority constituencies. At more than one-quarter of parliament this was as fair a representation as the Hezbollah-led group would have gotten in Western elections.

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Syrian hegemony. Hezbollah undercut Aoun in the Baabda constituency as part of a momentarily expedient understanding with Walid Jumblatt, and ordered its followers to vote against Aoun’s candidates. Aoun, however, had no problem making his own deal with Hezbollah some months later.

Rafiq al-Hariri’s former close advisor Fouad Siniora formed a new government based on the parliamentary outcome in July 2005. Syria’s allies, meaning Hezbollah, Amal, and representatives of President Lahoud, received a minority of cabinet posts – one short of the one-third giving them a veto on government decisions. Hence the parliamentary majority could govern, and the part of the minority that agreed to join the cabinet received its fair share. Michel Aoun, dissatisfied with the cabinet portfolios on offer, declined to enter the government and led the parliamentary opposition. As for the sectarian dimension, there was a carefully agreed allocation of cabinet posts among communities, within the constitutionally mandated balance of half Christian, half non-Christian.

In retrospect, renewed Lebanese independence, state sovereignty, and exercise of democratic freedoms achieved their peak between mid 2005 and mid 2006. All were flawed, and their “14 March” standard-bearers and mid 2006. All were flawed, and failed to reach out to the Aounists and their “14 March” standard-bearers and mid 2006. All were flawed, and their “14 March” standard-bearers and mid 2006. All were flawed, and their “14 March” standard-bearers and mid 2006. All were flawed, and their “14 March” standard-bearers and mid 2006. All were flawed, and their “14 March” standard-bearers and mid 2006. All were flawed, and their “14 March” standard-bearers and mid 2006. All were flawed, and their “14 March” standard-bearers and mid 2006. All were flawed, and their “14 March” standard-bearers and mid 2006. All were flawed, and their “14 March” standard-bearers and mid 2006. All were flawed, and their “14 March” standard-bearers and mid 2006. 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Syria, in the chancy hope that he might develop autonomy in office. The opposition accepted Suleiman’s candidacy but refused his election until they got their “national unity government” and veto power. The Siniora cabinet assumed presidential functions during the vacancy, in line with the constitution, but the opposition warned it to do no more than manage routine affairs. Lebanon thus had no president, no effective government, and no sitting parliament.

In both the international and domestic arenas, Lebanon’s “Cedar Revolution” lost ground. The new French president, Nicolas Sarkozy, shifted French policy from supporting Lebanese pluralism to pampering Syrian autocracy. The Hariri murder inquiry and tribunal seemed to lose all traction after the supposedly decisive UN Security Council move in June 2007, causing increasing despondency in the “14 March” coalition. Given that there was weighty evidence against identified suspects by early 2006, the chain-dragging into 2008 could only fuel suspicion that international players were more interested in exploiting the case as a bargaining chip than in truth and justice. Within Lebanon, Hezbollah piled up armaments in special military zones closed to the Lebanese state and continued to extend an unauthorized secret police system even into the mountains north of Beirut.

In early May 2008, Lebanon’s government responded with a forlorn, despairing bid to stop the rot. It transferred the Hezbollah aligned officer in charge of Beirut airport security and decided to probe Hezbollah’s private communications. On 8-9 May, Hezbollah and allied militias seized mainly Sunni West Beirut. The Party of God used heavy weapons in the mainly Druze hills in its “operation smash the balance” (amlialat kasr al-tawazun). It demonstrated conclusively that it would deploy deadly force against dissenting Lebanese, and the government promptly rescinded its offending decisions.

There are many concerns about the parliamentary elections scheduled for early 2009. The foremost is how there can be a free, fair choice and a robust free debate if one party is armed to the teeth and controls a large portion of the country, and if political murder continues to overshadow the whole arena. The US and France, having promoted international justice and encouraged the “14 March” camp to stick its neck out in early 2005, have a moral obligation in early 2009 to heed the consequences of backtracking on justice and engaging the Syrian ruling clique. Fear, despondency, and a triumphant neighboring autocracy may well bring the curtain down on Lebanon’s brief renewed independence. Grudging Syrian diplomatic recognition of Lebanon is irrelevant – if in full health and undeterred, Bashar al-Assad’s regime will make an embassy a high commissariat and secret police center.

In the end, if the majority of Lebanese want to put themselves in the hands of local demagogues and a Syria that ranks near the rock bottom of every global index of freedom and human rights that is their democratic privilege, they will throw out their pluralism together with its defects. History has precedents. Lebanon might ponder the twilight of Weimar Germany in the early 1930s. Only the decisive decay or disintegration of the present Syrian regime, or at least the prospect thereof, can secure Lebanese pluralism and induce the allies of Syria and Iran to respect it.

Even with much of its territory beyond state authority, a flawed electoral system, and a heavily corrupted state machine, Lebanon ranks far above all other Arab states in the 2008 Economist Intelligence Unit Index of Democracy. Lebanon features as a hybrid of democratic and authoritarian elements, just short of “flawed democracy,” with virtually the same score as Turkey across five components of democracy (electoral process and pluralism, functioning of government, political participation, political culture, and civil liberties). Lebanon ranks 89th out of 167 countries. The next Arab states, Iraq and Jordan, come 116th and 117th. Syria is a dismal 156th, beaten by Zimbabwe and Equatorial Guinea. In the cruel, barren Arab political context, Lebanon exhibits democratic traditions that are worth buttressing.

Several aspects of Lebanon’s contemporary circumstances deserve concluding observations.

First, two cross-sectarian alignments, with distinct ideological and foreign policy orientations, have emerged since 2005, especially since the Maronite General Assun joined the Hezbollah-led “8 March” in February 2006. “14 March” and “8 March” present the voter with clear choices, an advance on the confused factional politics of pre-1975.
Second, Lebanon remains a collection of communities, with communal politics represented by sectarian organizations like Hezbollah, Amal, the Lebanese Forces, the Phalange and so on. Lebanese politics will continue to differ from those of more homogeneous societies. As noted in the description of the 2005 election results and government formation, numerical democracy is quite well served anyway in today’s Lebanon – on the basis of Sunni/Druze, Christian, and Shiite “thirds” that reasonable estimates and competitive demonstrations indicate are demographic reality. Also, the winner-take-all electoral system means that the inadequate Shiite share of parliamentary seats has not in fact cheated the Hezbollah/Amal alliance. For 2009, given that Sunnis will largely head in one direction and Shiites in the other, the distribution of the Christian vote will probably be decisive.

Third, at some point in the not too distant future, the credibility of parliamentary sectarian allocations will require a credible census, under close UN supervision, along with decisions on participation of Diaspora Lebanese. All sorts of means are conceivable to update confessional democracy: a presidential council with a rotating chair; ending the communal monopolies on the three top offices of state, with an understanding that no community will have more than one at any one time; partial proportional voting for parliament to represent significant minorities within communities; a senate to represent communities with the lower house of parliament freed from sectarian allocations; and stronger district authorities. However, neither a proper census nor political innovations are possible until Rafiq al-Hariri’s murderers are apprehended. In the meantime, there is no better Lebanese democracy in prospect than the present democracy, which demands full state sovereignty and state monopoly of force. This democracy, this sovereignty, and this monopoly of force must be upheld.

Fourth, no democracy and no political pluralism can coexist indefinitely with political murder. If the UN murder inquiry and tribunal avoid pursuing the masterminds, political murder will be triumphant in Lebanon and democracy will be imperiled. There can be no properly free politics as long as “14 March” politicians face death lists.

Further, the July 2005 murder attempt against Defense Minister Elias al-Murr, who had fallen out with Syrian military intelligence, and the September 2008 killing of Druze opposition personality Saleh Aridi, demonstrate the perils that await members of the “8 March” camp who become inconvenient. And it is not just political life that is at stake. Given that chaos and Syrian hegemony have terrorized and corrupted the Lebanese legal system into impotence, only the successful operation of the mixed Lebanese-international tribunal authorized under Chapter VII of the UN Charter in Security Council resolution 1757 can help restore an independent judiciary to Lebanon.

Fifth, Lebanon cannot exist as a decent society without a tolerant pluralism. It has to accommodate an absolutist party, Hezbollah, which presently dominates but falls greatly short of monopolizing the Shiite community and proclaims, according to billboards: “We are always right (daiman ‘andna al-haqq).” In a democracy people who are “always right” are sometimes difficult to accommodate. Their attitude implies determination to coordinate everyone to the “right” view and grudging acknowledgment of pluralism only as long as the balance of forces compels acknowledgment. Lebanese political life since 2005 has given fair space to a party like Hezbollah while resisting total minority hijacking of the country’s affairs. Outsiders have a duty to assist Lebanon uphold this delicate golden mean of democracy.
1845: Appointed multi-communal advisory councils for qa’immaqs of Ottoman Mount Lebanon.

1864-1915: Indirectly elected administrative council of Ottoman autonomous province of Mount Lebanon.

1920: Inauguration of French rule under League of Nations mandate, and French extension of boundaries of Mount Lebanon to create modern Lebanese territorial state.

1920-1926: Indirectly elected multi-communal representative council (electorate voting for electoral college, which then elected members).

1926: Lebanese constitution introduced, with bicameral parliament (chamber of deputies and senate).

First chamber of deputies appointed.

1927: Change to single chamber parliament, with senate abolished.

1929: Six year non-renewable term fixed for president. First parliamentary elections held.

1932: First and only Lebanese census.

1934: Mandatory power suspends constitution.

1932-1934: Mandatory power suspends constitution.

1934: First direct elections to parliament.

1939-1943: Mandatory power suspends constitution.

1943: Sixth chamber of deputies abrogates mandate, French briefly imprison communal leaders, and Lebanon achieves independence under ‘national pact’ understanding among communal leaders – oral arrangement for sectarian operation of the 1926 constitution.

1944: President Emile Bechaurer resigns, allowing for abandonment of elections.

1945: First direct elections to parliament, with senate abolished.

1948: President Bishara al-Khoury gets constitutional amendment to allow him an extended term.


1953-1957: Gerrymandered parliamentary elections as Chamoun struggles to assert authority.

1958: Brief violent breakdown of Lebanese state. Pressures come from creation of the United Arab Republic, and Chamoun’s interest in an extended term. US mediation enables elite to step back from the brink.

1958-1964: Presidency of Fouad Chehab, with mild social welfare orientation and mitigation of communal imbalances in the bureaucracy.

1967: Arab defeat in Arab-Israeli war leads to Palestinian assertion in Lebanon, Israeli military incursions, and consequent Christian-Muslim tensions.

1968: Syria launches reconstruction program.

1972: Chehab’s assassination prompts a move to a presidential succession arrangement for sectarian operation of the 1926 constitution.


1978: Ta’ifi agreement to adjust constitution inaugurates “Second Lebanese Republic.” Executive power shifted from president to council of ministers.

1990-2005: Lebanon Renaissance Foundation


2006: Outburst of hostilities between Hezbollah and Israel.


1-Sources for sectarian demographic trends for the period since Lebanon’s first and only census in 1932 include Chamie, J. “Differentials in Fertility: Lebanon, 1971,” Population Studies 31:2 (1977), 365-382; Faour, M. “The Demography of Lebanon: A Reappraisal,” Middle Eastern Studies 27:4 (1991), 631-641; Faour, M. “Religion, Demography, and Politics in Lebanon,” Middle Eastern Studies 43:6 (2007), 999-1031; and Harris, W. The New Face of Lebanon (Princeton: Markus Wiener, 2006), 82-86. Data come from fertility records and population surveys, for example the 1970 Lebanese government survey of 30,000 households, a population count from the 1988 Hariri Foundation food distribution program, and Lebanese government national family surveys in 1996 and 2004. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, Christians are probably about 35 percent of the Lebanese population, with Maronites 20-25%, Shiites have become 30-35%; Sunnis represent 25-30%; and Druze are around 5%. The Shiite natural increase rate has declined since the 1980s, and Muhammad Faour demonstrates that northern rural Sunnis have the highest fertility rate today. Differentials within communities are probably as high as between communities.

2-See the official UN transcript of the 24 April 2007 Ban Ki-moon meeting with Bashar al-Assad, pages 3 and 4. President Assad told the secretary-general: “Instability would intensify if the Special Tribunal were established. This was particularly the case if the Tribunal were established under Chapter 7 of the Charter. This could easily ignite a conflict which would result in civil war [in Lebanon] and provoke divisions between Sunni and Shi’a from the Mediterranean to the Caspian Sea … If the Tribunal was achieved via Chapter 7, it would have grave consequences that could not be contained within Lebanon.”

On the democratically elected Lebanese parliamentary majority, President Assad observed that “the Syrian people hated the March 14 Movement.”

3-In al-Hayat (London and Beirut), 21 May 2007, the respected journalist Muhammad Shuqayr, with information from Palestinian informants in northern Lebanon, named Syrian intelligence officers who were coordinating the Fath al-Islam jihadist group in Tripoli and Nahr al-Bared. Al-Sharq al-Awsat (London), 9 June 2007, reported from “Jordanian judicial sources” that Fath al-Islam leader Shakir al-Abssi ran a training camp in Syria “to house and equip suicide bombers and elements involved in al-Qaeda before their dispatch to battle in Iraq,” this before he moved to Lebanon from Syria in 2005. Al-Nahar (Beirut), 22 and 23 August 2007, interviewed former prisoners in Syrian jails on Syrian intelligence mobilization of imprisoned jihadists (“Have Syrian jails become a ‘land of support’ for jihad in Iraq and Lebanon?”).