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# Middle East Brief

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## Beyond Sectarianism: Understanding Lebanese Politics through a Cross- Sectarian Lens

Jeffrey G. Karam

After two and a half years of failed attempts to agree on a candidate to fill the post of President of Lebanon, on October 20, 2016, Saad Hariri, the Sunni former Premier, nominated Michel Aoun, the Christian Maronite former commander in chief of the Lebanese Armed Forces, for the presidency. Aoun assumed the presidency on October 31, 2016, and shortly afterwards nominated Saad Hariri for the position of Premier.<sup>1</sup> Hariri's initiative both ended the Lebanese presidential crisis and began to mend the political rift between Aoun's mostly Christian Free Patriotic Movement and Hariri's predominantly Sunni Future Movement. Many Lebanese are welcoming the entente between Hariri and Aoun, which in effect is between the Future Movement and Hezbollah.<sup>2</sup>

This development is not consistent, however, with the common perception of Lebanon as dominated by sectarianism, a system that is primarily organized along religious lines.<sup>3</sup> This Brief offers an alternative to that conventional understanding of Lebanese politics and argues:

1. that Lebanese politics are dominated as much by cross-sectarian alliances as by sectarianism<sup>4</sup>;
2. that these cross-sectarian alliances primarily serve Lebanon's elites but not necessarily the communities they represent;

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3. that these alliances actually have a stabilizing effect; but
4. that the resulting stability comes with a price tag: specifically, a political stalemate that does not permit Lebanon to cure its chronic ailments.

## The Durability of Cross-Sectarian Alliances in Lebanon

For decades, almost every discussion of Lebanese politics has argued that sectarianism is the root cause of the country's devastating wars, underdevelopment, foreign intervention, and chronic instability.<sup>5</sup> A sectarian characterization of Lebanese politics emphasizes that Christians, Muslims, Druze, and other confessional communities are caught in a perpetual cycle of competition rooted in antagonistic religious identities. Lebanon's foundational power-sharing agreement, the National Pact of 1943—entered into on the eve of independence—is indeed organized along sectarian lines; and it would be absurd to argue that religion and sectarian differences are not salient features in the history of Lebanon. In fact, Lebanon's two civil wars, in 1958 and in 1975–90, both had some sectarian overtones, as does almost every political dispute between different groups in Lebanon.

But an account of Lebanese politics viewed solely through the lens of sectarianism is misleading, for two reasons. First, a purely sectarian lens cannot account for cooperation between and across rival political parties and confessional groups before, during, and after different elections. For example, five months after the June 2009 parliamentary elections, Saad Hariri formed a National Unity Government which included Hezbollah, the Free Patriotic Movement, and other rival parties. Second, an exclusively sectarian lens cannot explain how Lebanon has so far been pulled from the brink of civil war, despite brewing tension between the Future Movement and Hezbollah over the latter's involvement in the Syrian civil war.

In fact, since independence in 1943, Lebanon's history has been marked by cross-sectarian compromises that have made possible solutions to various crises and allowed for social normalcy.<sup>6</sup> The National Pact of 1943 was itself a power-sharing agreement reached between Muslim and Christian leaders that enabled independence.<sup>7</sup> The “No Victor, No Vanquished” model established after the civil war in 1958 was the political order that a coalition of Christian and Muslim leaders brokered across ideological lines.<sup>8</sup> The Ta'if Accords of 1989 were agreed to by almost all Muslim and Christian leaders as a new framework for power-sharing after a fifteen-year civil war.<sup>9</sup> The Doha Agreement of 2008, which followed clashes between Hezbollah and the Future Movement, was an accord between Christian and Muslim leaders to elect a new President and avoid another civil war.<sup>10</sup> And most recently, the Aoun-Hariri rapprochement of 2016 ended a thirty-month political impasse. All of these agreements were cross-sectarian political deals that primarily served the interests of Lebanon's elites.<sup>11</sup> What motivates these elites to form cross-sectarian alliances?

### To Defeat Intra-Group and Cross-Sectarian Opponents

Lebanon's political elites form cross-sectarian alliances, first, to undercut the competition from contenders both within their own sect and from other communities. These contenders range from intra-communal competitors for power and non-sectarian organizations to broadly based coalitions of cross-

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sectarian movements. Driven primarily by electoral competition, the elites in almost every confessional group have resorted to forging both intra-group and cross-sectarian alliances to discourage contenders from challenging their leadership. Competition for leadership, and over allocation of municipal and parliamentary seats, extends to almost every confessional sect in Lebanon: Maronite Christians, Sunnis, Shias, Druze, and other groups.<sup>12</sup> There are numerous examples in Lebanon's history that point to the role of elites in brokering such alliances.

Thus, Michel Aoun and Samir Geagea, two influential Maronite Christian leaders, each formed cross-sectarian alliances in 2005 and 2006 to weaken one another within the Maronite community and undercut contenders for their leadership positions: Aoun brokered an alliance with Hezbollah, and Geagea followed suit with the Future Movement.<sup>13</sup> Specifically, Aoun needed Hezbollah's constituencies in mixed Christian and Muslim districts to weaken Geagea and other Maronite contenders during parliamentary elections, while Geagea relied on the Future Movement's predominantly Sunni base in mixed Christian and Muslim districts to defeat Aoun-supported candidates and other Maronite rivals. The logic behind these alliances, then, was similar and ensured the maintenance of the status quo vis-à-vis the Maronite community and the larger Lebanese political landscape.

The Aoun-Geagea reconciliation in 2015 is a recent example as well of an intra-group alliance intended to contain intra-communal rivals.<sup>14</sup> While Geagea's nomination of Aoun for the presidency at first seemed an irrational step, the warlord's objective was to form an alliance with Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement in both the municipal elections of 2016 and the next round of parliamentary elections. This reconciliation has already borne fruit, as it allowed Geagea to secure several cabinet portfolios in Hariri's recently formed cabinet. And it will probably also allow the two Maronite leaders to together secure the largest share of Christian parliamentary seats in the next elections. The resulting parliamentary bloc will not only play a decisive role in forming the post-elections cabinet, but would also allow both the Free Patriotic Movement and Geagea's Lebanese Forces Party to broaden their bases of support as well as weaken two Maronite rivals: Amin Gemayel and Suleiman Franjeh. And the alliance will most probably defeat Gemayel and Franjeh's supported lists of candidates in various districts. Although Gemayel and Franjeh are members of the traditional political elite, Aoun and Geagea, through intra-sectarian alliances established during the second Lebanese civil war and cross-sectarian relationships

forged since 2005, weakened their standing in the Maronite community.

In addition to these recent examples of intra-Christian Maronite alliances, almost all sectarian groups have formed alliances to shore up their position against both intra-group and cross-sectarian contenders. For example, in 1957–58, a coalition of Muslim and Christian leaders formed an alliance across sectarian and ideological lines to prevent the pro-Western president Camille Chamoun from seeking another term in office.<sup>15</sup> During Lebanon's second civil war and particularly in the 1980s, some Christian Maronite warlords, including Elie Hobeika of the Lebanese Forces militia, formed alliances with Muslim and Druze leaders to weaken other Maronite leaders. Specifically, this alliance, later known as the Tripartite Agreement of 1985, was formed between Hobeika; Nabih Berri, leader of the Shia Amal Movement; and Walid Jumblatt, leader of the predominantly Druze Progressive Socialist Party. While the declared purpose of this cross-sectarian alliance was to end the Lebanese war, the actual motive was to weaken two Maronite leaders: Samir Geagea and Amin Gemayel.<sup>16</sup>

Moreover, during Lebanon's second civil war, some Muslim and Druze groups formed cross-sectarian alliances and partnered with Palestinian militants in Lebanon in an effort to end Maronite supremacy.<sup>17</sup> One example of such a cross-sectarian alliance, which was then known as the Lebanese National Movement (LNM), consisted of the predominantly Druze Progressive Socialist Party; the mixed Christian and Muslim Lebanese Communist Party; the mixed Christian, Muslim, and Druze Syrian Socialist Nationalist Party; the mostly Sunni Popular Nasserite Organization; and the predominantly Sunni *Al Mourabitoun* (the Vigilantes or Sentinels).<sup>18</sup> The LNM was primarily a wartime cross-sectarian alliance against mostly Christian-based militias and parties; several groups in this alliance also played an important role in several rounds of negotiations to end armed clashes during the war. Parliamentarians from some of the groups in the LNM later participated in and benefited from the Ta'if Accords of 1989 and the post-war political order.

Most of the cross-sectarian political alliances in Lebanon have focused on thwarting contenders within and across sectarian groups; but there are a few examples of challenges to the status quo from non-sectarian reform movements. The civil society group *Beirut Madinati* (Beirut Is My City), which first appeared as a volunteer-led campaign before the municipal elections of 2016, is a recent example of a non-sectarian movement that seeks to challenge the ruling elite.<sup>19</sup> The group participated in

the municipal elections but were defeated by the Saad Hariri-backed Beirutis' List (List of Beirut Residents).<sup>20</sup> Despite the most recent presidential crisis, which lasted well over two years, a coalition of Muslim, Druze, and Christian leaders—including Hariri, Aoun, and Geagea along with Nabih Berri, Speaker of the House, and Walid Jumblatt—brokered an alliance across sectarian and ideological lines to defeat *Beirut Madinati*.<sup>21</sup>

### *To Exploit State Resources, Build Patronage, and Restrain State Institutions*

Lebanon's political elites' other motivation to form cross-sectarian alliances is the desire to gain control over state resources and to maintain patronage networks within their communities and electoral strongholds. After every major political compromise, the important service ministries (including health, public works, telecommunications, and social affairs), along with the four so-called "sovereign ministries" (defense, foreign affairs, interior, and finance) are divided among the elites. (When other government councils have been needed in order to focus on post-war reconstruction, these have likewise been shared among elites.) It comes as no surprise that Lebanese politics have been accurately characterized as the epitome of patron-client relations, whereby elites provide services to their clients in order to maintain their loyalty.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, the allocation of resources often extends beyond a given elite's sect and stretches to clients, clans, and families across other sectarian districts whose support is vital during elections.<sup>23</sup> Three examples exhibit these dynamics:

1) The Ministry of the Displaced was set up in 1991 to facilitate and manage the return of citizens who either left their lands and homes or were forced to abandon them during the civil war of 1975–90. The Ministry focused most of its efforts on areas in Mount Lebanon, the battleground for Christian-Druze and Christian-Muslim clashes in the early 1980s—the expectation being that the Ministry would provide services to all sectarian groups that had suffered during the war. After the war ended, however, the Ministry came under the control of Walid Jumblatt.<sup>24</sup> This afforded Jumblatt significant discretion over state resources, which he exploited to strengthen his patronage networks in the Druze community and among other sects in Mount Lebanon and so ensure their loyalty in future elections. Jumblatt would disburse grants to Druze and Maronite families, for example, to help them rebuild their homes, and Jumblatt loyalists in the Ministry would likewise provide small grants to help municipalities in key electoral districts purchase asphalt and pave roads.<sup>25</sup>

2) The *Majlis al-Janoub* (Council of the South) was partly created to assist displaced persons and victims of hostilities with Israel in southern Lebanon; it also became responsible for all matters of relief and post-war reconstruction in the south.<sup>26</sup> The Council receives its budget from the government and has been controlled by the Amal Movement since the mid-1980s,<sup>27</sup> and Nabih Berri has been able to build and strengthen his patronage networks in the Shia community by maintaining sole discretionary control over distribution of the Council's massive resources.<sup>28</sup> Partisans of the Amal Movement receive the lion's share of those resources, but Berri and his loyalists on the Council have also extended reconstruction grants to Muslim and Christian heads of municipalities in order to widen their patronage networks. These grants were to repair schools, hospitals, and roads in strategic electoral strongholds in the south.<sup>29</sup>

3) The *Majlis al'inma' wal 'I'mar* (Council for Development and Reconstruction, or CDR) was created by the government of Lebanon in the late 1970s to facilitate and monitor economic plans for state-building.<sup>30</sup> After the civil war, Rafiq Hariri (Saad Hariri's father) was appointed head of the CDR, which was then tasked with overseeing Lebanon's most important post-war reconstruction planning.<sup>31</sup> The private company Soldiere was awarded the most lucrative post-war reconstruction project—the rebuilding of downtown Beirut—but as he was the largest shareholder in the company, Hariri had blurred the boundaries between private profit and the public interest.<sup>32</sup> (Several other government officials were also involved with Soldiere.) By allocating state resources to rebuild schools, small health centers, and hospitals in important electoral strongholds across Lebanon, Hariri and his closest advisors used CDR and other state institutions to reward members of the Future Movement in Beirut along with loyal clients in Sunni strongholds in northern Lebanon—and to build and strengthen patronage networks in other Muslim, Druze, and Christian communities in Lebanon as well.<sup>33</sup>

Given the value of state resources for building and strengthening patronage networks, Lebanon's political elites consistently restrain state institutions from functioning as impartial bodies,<sup>34</sup> thereby maintaining, and reinforcing, a direct relationship between the populace and them rather than with the government.<sup>35</sup> This reality is critical to understanding why generations of Lebanese citizens seek support, commonly known as *wasta*, from the elites for jobs, for access to government services, and for help in

resolving personal and business issues that are tied up at any level of government.<sup>36</sup>

## The Two Faces of Cross-Sectarian Alliances: Stability and Stalemate

Cross-sectarian alliances have actually had a stabilizing effect on Lebanese domestic politics. In fact, Lebanon is much more stable than it might otherwise appear, despite its many external threats and internal challenges, including the rippling effects of the Syrian civil war and the presence of millions of Syrian refugees in different Lebanese towns; widespread discontent over Hezbollah's active involvement in the Syrian crisis; intermittent violence and clashes in northern Lebanon and along the Syrian-Lebanese border; occasional terrorist attacks inside and outside of Beirut; and brewing tension between Hezbollah and Israel—along with a struggling economy.

Yet, despite ongoing tension between Hezbollah and the Future Movement over several issues, including the former's suspected role in assassinating Rafiq Hariri and its involvement in the Syrian war, representatives from both parties maintain dialogue channels to resolve their differences,<sup>37</sup> thereby diffusing what several Hezbollah and Future Movement parliamentarians have referred to as "Sunni-Shia tensions in the street."<sup>38</sup> Saad Hariri's invitation to Hezbollah to join his government and the latter's willingness to partake in the cross-sectarian, elite-based political order have so far restrained supporters in both parties from taking up arms.

Moreover, to relieve tensions, Hezbollah members hold dialogue sessions every now and then with the mostly Christian-based Lebanese Kataeb Party, even though the Party received support from Israel<sup>39</sup> during the second Lebanese civil war.<sup>40</sup> These sessions occurred despite repeated attacks on Hezbollah's right to bear arms and criticism of its support for the Assad regime in Syria from Samy Gemayel, president of the Kataeb Party.

At the same time, the prevalence of cross-sectarian alliances in Lebanon is associated with continuous political stalemate. The restraining mechanisms that have so far pulled Lebanon back from the brink of war and maintained a degree of relative stability are based on maintaining a balance of power through consensus-based decision-making.<sup>41</sup> But when political elites fail to reach consensus, as has been the case repeatedly, Lebanon is crippled by deadlock.

The latest political impasse, which lasted about thirty months, was caused by a lack of consensus over which Maronite Christian should assume the presidency. The failure to agree on a candidate led several political parties, including Hezbollah and the Free Patriotic Movement, to boycott legislative sessions, thereby ensuring that the necessary quorum to hold a session would not be present.<sup>42</sup>

In a very different context, the piles of garbage that recently appeared and occasionally still do appear on the streets of Beirut came about because of the inability of the country's political elites to agree on the location of new landfills and on how to divvy up expected profits from waste treatment centers.<sup>43</sup> Such political paralysis can prevent the government from addressing basic issues and persistent problems, whether regarding electricity, water, health, or waste.

## Moving Forward: Is There an Alternative to the Current State of Affairs?

The emergence of civil society groups and grassroots organizations such as *Beirut Madinati* provides an inkling of hope that there might be an alternative to the current, double-edged state of affairs. Almost all of these grassroots organizations are made up of student activists and workers, and most of their campaigns advocate a nonsectarian platform in opposition to the sectarian-based political system—one that aims to raise political awareness about rampant corruption and dysfunctional decision-making. In the summer of 2015, for instance, *Tul'it Rihitkum* (You Stink), a grassroots movement, rallied against the government to protest the piles of uncollected garbage and the constant embezzlement of taxpayer money.<sup>44</sup> Most recently, the You Stink movement and other civil society groups mobilized thousands of Lebanese to take to the streets and protest against the government's proposed tax hikes.<sup>45</sup>

Most of these protests were detached from the political process, but *Beirut Madinati* decided to change that by partaking in the municipal elections of 2016. Supported by the You Stink movement, the group—whose candidates included artists, musicians, small business owners, scholars, and physicians—focused its energies on ousting the traditional circles of power in Beirut's municipality before broadening its base, it hoped, to participate in parliamentary elections.<sup>46</sup> Though the elite-backed Beirutis' List captured all twenty-four municipal seats, *Beirut Madinati* was successful in two ways: It rallied the masses and built on the momentum of previous organizations such as You Stink that were



staging various anti-government protests; and it demonstrated to tens of thousands of followers in Lebanon and other countries around the world that one significant way to challenge the status quo was to partake in the political process, especially elections, rather than simply complain.

*Beirut Madinati's* experience suggests that civil society groups will most likely participate in the next parliamentary elections. In fact, the advent and empowerment of civil society groups and voluntary associations are important steps in a long journey aimed at challenging Lebanon's consensus-based decision-making process. Any such broad coalition of nonsectarian civil society groups and volunteer-led campaigns, however, will be competing in a political system that is rigged (or, sometimes, intentionally paralyzed) so as to favor elite interests. The bottom line is that as long as the elites control institutions and public resources, the Lebanese electoral system will continue to create very limited opportunities for non-elite cross-sectarian movements to effectively challenge the status quo.

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## Conclusion

This Brief provides an alternative to conventional understandings of Lebanese politics and argues that the usual accounts fail to explain recurrent instances when elites have brokered deals across sectarian divides that primarily serve their interests rather than their communities'. It discusses how elites broker cross-sectarian alliances to fight off contenders both within their community and across political and sectarian lines—as well as to gain control over state resources and maintain patronage networks within their own communities and amidst electoral strongholds.

The Brief also points out how cross-sectarian alliances have actually exerted a stabilizing effect on Lebanese domestic politics—though that relative stability is associated with continuous political stalemate. Civil society groups are attempting to bring about an alternative to the status quo by participating in the political process; but the current sectarian and elite-based structure of the Lebanese political system will continue to create very limited opportunities for non-elite and nonsectarian movements to effectively change the status quo.

Clearly, the issue of cross-sectarianism will be a factor in the upcoming general elections in Lebanon, if do they happen in 2017<sup>47</sup>, in one significant way: We can anticipate a déjà vu of alliances between strange bedfellows among the elites in different electoral districts, as in the elections of 2009,<sup>48</sup> to undercut contenders to their leadership. Given the recent mobilization of thousands of Lebanese against the government's proposed tax hikes as well as daily news about massive embezzlement of public funds,<sup>49</sup> it seems certain that the country's elites are determined to craft a new electoral law that favors cross-sectarian elite interests and preserves the status quo. In 2013 and 2014, the elites maintained the status quo by postponing elections, citing security concerns emanating from the war in Syria.<sup>50</sup> The current political gridlock on what electoral law might best serve elite interests is increasing the likelihood that Lebanon's parliamentarians will extend their term for a third time. This extension will almost certainly further mobilize more Lebanese citizens to join anti-government protests and might enable them to participate more effectively in the next elections.

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## Endnotes

The author thanks David Patel, Shai Feldman, Naghmeleh Sohrabi, Sana Tannoury-Karam, and Robert Cohen for helpful comments on earlier drafts.

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