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Collapsed States

Country Report: Lebanon

For many reasons, the Republic of Lebanon is a remarkable example of the process

of state failure and state collapse. To anyone wandering the streets of Beirut in the 1960s,

when the city was still a booming hotspot for international commerce and culture, it

probably would have been hard to imagine that the "Paris of the East" would be the

capital of a collapsed state in a matter of years. Likewise, to anyone in Beirut during the

1990s, following a fifteen-year period of violence and factionalized chaos, the ruins of

Beirut pre-civil war would appear haunting, as though the city's past distinction was only

myth. Since the war's end in 1990, Lebanon has made great progress towards

reconstruction, though it is still far from regaining its past status as the "Switzerland of

the East." It may no longer be entrenched in war, but the state of Lebanon continues to be

weakened by the very factors that played significant roles in its decline: a system of

government that caters to the state's factions and extensive involvement in regional

conflicts.

A part of the Ottoman Empire until 1918, the state of Lebanon was created by a

French mandate in 1920, mostly under pressures from the Maronite Christian population.

At one point in the "carving up" of the Ottoman Empire, the French divided the mandate

into five separate states, including the Christian-run Greater Lebanon, but southern and

northern regions, predominately Muslim areas, were added for economic viability.[1] These

Muslim areas outside of the Mount Lebanon district also ascribed an Arab identity to

themselves, whereas the Maronite Christians saw themselves as descendents of ancient Canaan, and therefore called themselves Phoenicians.[2] As this shows, the very creation of the Lebanese state acknowledges that two very different groups were being incorporated into one body. Upon gaining independence in 1943, the National Pact was created by two prominent leaders, one of them a Maronite Christian and the other a Sunni Muslim. The unwritten pact stipulated that power in all formal institutions would be shared on a 6:5 ratio between Christians and Muslims, with the highest positions being divided among the different groups. For example, if the president was Maronite Christian, then the premier was Sunni, the speaker of parliament would be Shi'i, and so on. The political system also insured that those in the highest positions would be selected from within an elite group. Elections were held on a regional basis, with the parliament appointing the president, as well as most government positions. The compromise also said that Lebanon would have "some degree of Arab identity," and should "adhere to a foreign policy defined as 'neither East nor West'."[3] This power-sharing pact was both symptomatic and causative of the lack of unity in a Lebanese identity, a weakness that would eventually pull the state apart and make the people regard the government as illegitimate.

As the state continued to change, however, the pact was not altered to suit the new conditions in the state. The 6:5 ratio, for example, had been determined based off of a census taken around the time of independence. As a result of birthrate patterns and

[1] Jonathan C. Randal, *Going All the Way: Christian Warlords, Israeli Adventureres, and the War in Lebanon* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1984) 188.
[2] *CIA: The World Factbook: Lebanon*, https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/ the-world-factbook/geos/le.html (December 4, 2008).
[3] Oren Barak, "Lebanon: Failure, Collapse, and Resuscitation," *State Failure and State Weakness in a Time of Terror*, ed. Robert I. Rotberg (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2003) 311.

emigration, the Muslim population grew in comparison to the Christian population, which invalidated the 6:5 ratio. Debate regarding Lebanon's future heated up among the Arab nations in 1954. As Israeli Prime Minister Moshe Sharett noted, "The Maronites are split. Those who favor Christian separatism are weak and will not dare do a thing. A Christian Lebanon would mean foregoing the Tyre district, Tripoli, the Beqaa."[4] The retired Israeli Prime Minister Ben-Gurion argued in turn, "Lebanon is the weakest link in the chain of the [Arab] Leage," emphasizing that the Christians there "the majority in the historical Lebanon and this majority has a totally different heritage and culture from the rest of the League."[5] For this reasons, leaders like Ben-Gurion supported the idea of a separate Christian Lebanese state, even if foreign support was required for the separatist movement to succeed.

Muslim communities especially began to see the distribution of groups in the government as being "anachronistic" and unfair.[6] The ratio, as the presence in 1954 of the discussion of a Christian state shows, had been tipped for many years. Throughout the '60s and '70s, there was an outcry for a new census to be taken. However, the differing notions of Lebanese identity indicate that the census was not the real issue at hand. Accordingly, because the Maronite Christians did not want to lose any of their stronghold in the government or their role in the elite, there was hardly any adjustment to the proportions of resources until 1975. By the 1980s, radical Maronite leaders were demanding some kind of "special position" in Lebanon, as they pointed out that they were the group with the highest levels of education and economic status, and they had

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[4] Randal 189.
[5] Randal 190.
[6] Barak 311.

played a "central role" in the state's creation in 1920.[7] This disagreement between those in power and those vying for greater power was the first step in the Lebanese government losing legitimacy in the eyes of the people.

The economy was still flourishing up to until conflict broke out in the 1970s, Beirut in particular being a hub of business, international trade, and tourism. Even within this development, however, there was inherent weakness. Michel Chiha, a wealthy banker and the "mastermind" of the political system, said of Lebanon in 1966, "They (foreigners) see peace and plenty here, whereas we import almost everything and we export practically nothing, which seems a sort of miracle."[8] In his chapter entitled "Visions of Lebanon," Albert Hourani calls the attitude within and without Lebanon in the 1960s "cautious optimism."[9] These eye-witness accounts are strikingly foretelling, considering the extent of economic collapse that would happen during the civil war, when Lebanon would no longer be able to depend upon banking and tourism, its two major industries.

Elections were also held on a regular and consistent basis, and the majority of the population enjoyed great freedom. Still, the government and legal institutions were seen as increasingly illegitimate, and there was a general disregard for the law, which resulted in escalating crime rates throughout the '70s. Even though the competition among groups during elections sometimes resulted in corruption, assassinations, and intimidation of voters, the country was still seen as a legitimate democracy. The essential qualities that it was lacking, however, were what threatened its endurance and made it weak. As Barak

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[7] Barak 312.
[8] Barak 314.

points out, one fundamental flaw in the thinking of the country's leaders was that they saw the state as the means of dividing power between them. [10] Instead, they should have seen the state for its important function in unifying a pluralist society by alleviating tensions between groups and making cooperation more attainable.

Though a member of the Arab League, Lebanon was spared deep involvement in the Arab-Israeli conflict on the grounds of its foreign policy of neutrality, as prescribed in the 1943 agreement, and its lack of militaristic strength. By the mid-1960s, however, it had become heavily involved in the Palestinian national movement. Barak calls it a "safe haven" for the movement, as Lebanon had a weak government, shared a border with Israel, and had a large and increasing number of Palestinian refugees.[11] Once Palestinian military activities began to take place from within Lebanon, the Lebanese government did not have sufficient power to step in. This further undermined the legitimacy of the government (and likewise the military), as its "role was reduced to that of a bystander" in its own country.[12] The Syrian government, meanwhile, began to see Lebanon as either a threat or an asset, and by the early 1970s it was determined to bring Lebanon under its influence. These growing influences from outside the state contributed greatly, especially on the lower levels of involvement, to undermine the power of the Lebanese government.

The first violence clashes came in April of 1975. As Jonathan Randall describes, "Suddenly, Lebanon's contradictions, complexities, and fragility came into focus- and

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[9] Halim Barakat, "Foreword," *Toward a Viable Lebanon* (Washington, D.C.: Croom Helm, 1988) 4.
[10] Barak 314.
[11] Barak 315.
[12] Barak 315.

froze."[13] "Right from the start there was an unwillingness to stop and think, a refusal to compromise, a deep-seated delight in striking poses and carrying out acts that could only lead to further murderous adventures," he goes on to say.[14] Accordingly, in spite of more urgent calls for a new census, the government refused to consider changing the 1943 power-sharing pact, citing the Palestinian presence as meriting greater attention than "internal reform."[15] In response to this staunch stance, the growing opposition movement declared it would introduce change, even by force. In the book *Toward a Viable Lebanon*, Khalidi in the chapter "The Palestinians and Lebanon" quotes the majority of Lebanese who, when asked about this period, blame the rapid destruction of the state on the Palestinians. More generally speaking, the view is that foreigners (*ghuraba*) destroyed Lebanon, and Palestinians led this foreign involvement.[16]

As Khalidi points out in 1988, for those who believe this, there can be no possible reconciliation in the future between Palestinians and Lebanese. This also poses a threat to the existence of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, a group that still forms a substantial population in the country today (405,425 as of 2007).[17] Khalidi points out the fact of Lebanon's worsened situation once the PLO did pull out in 1982, but says that this has not altered the predominant view. It should also be mentioned that there remains another smaller perception in Lebanon of the Palestinians as fellow sufferers under the occupation of Israel (in the south of the country), but this view is held mostly by those prescribed to Islamic, not Lebanese, unity.

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[13] Randal x.
[14] Randal x.
[15] Barak 317.
[16] Rashid Khalidi, "The Palestinians and Lebanon," *Toward a Viable Lebanon*, ed. Halim Barakat (Washington, D.C.: Croom Helm, 1988) 134.

Central authority had rapidly deteriorated by March of 1976, when the president controlled only his palace, as he had had to leave the capital. Also in 1976, the president called out to Syria to help pacify the conflict by introducing itself as a militaristic presence. Syria complied, concerned for itself because of proximity to the unrest, and it endorsed the Lebanese president's proposal of political reform, though this reform did not come to pass. The entry of the Syrian army into Lebanon marked "one of the decisive moments in the war."[18] In October of 1976, Syria was granted support from a pan-Arab summit, its official task being "to restore law and order in Lebanon."[19] In the vacuum of authority and institutions, militias rose up, their arms provided by Lebanon's neighbors. Often, these groups set out on campaigns of ethnic cleansing, which resulted in widespread death, destruction, and internal and external displacement. Because many of these militias were actually composed of mid-ranking army men, they soon came to be potent groups and by the late 1980s had become actual armies with large amounts of arms. The extent of internal armed conflict was unprecedented and nearly destroyed Lebanon's economy, which was only stimulated by the activities of the various militias. At this point of collapse, Lebanon's partition (*taqsim*) "seemed imminent, if not inevitable."[20]

The definition of state collapse that we have gained from Rotberg, Zartmann, and the likes had been fulfilled at this point. Nonetheless, the situation in Lebanon, even while it was technically collapsed, was not beyond repair. Barak, who calls the situation "paradoxical" to the outcome expected under the state collapse model, attributes

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[17] *CIA: World Factbook: Lebanon.*
[18] Barak 321.
[19] Barak 321.

Lebanon's recovery to several key factors. One such factor is that foreign actors may have played a role in the collapse of the state, but ultimately it was the internal forces that helped reconstruct the state, just as it had created the underlying weaknesses in it that lead up to its collapse. The majority of Lebanese continued to see the restoration of the Lebanese state as preferable to all other options. They saw their state as "irreplaceable" and a return to a power-sharing style of government as the eventual outcome of the war.[21]

Furthermore, most formal institutions and state agencies were crippled during the war, but did not cease to function or fall apart. Until late 1988, the government and president still represented the state as the legitimate government, or *al-Shar'iyya*. Parliament also continued to meet and hold elections. The army, ministries, and banks remained intact and functioned as far as they were able. Later, this allowed for time and money to be saved in the rebuilding process, as the bureaucracy did not need to be entirely rebuilt or new bureaucrats trained. In fact, the failed attempts in 1988 to elect a new president and the threat that they posed to the state proved that the continuation of the institutions were necessary to the state. When two presidents, Muslim-backed Salim el-Hoss and Christian militia-backed General Michel Aoun, claimed exclusive legitimacy, dual governments formed that split the institutions along religious lines. This stalemate during the bloodiest two years of the conflict (1988-1990) was ended when the Michel Aoun declared a War of Liberation on the Syrian occupied parts of Lebanon, thinking that the country would unite under this cause. In many ways, this reasoning was legitimate. Randal cites an "across-the-board hatred of the Syrians," who, "Brought in first to help the Christians against the Muslims and Palestinians, the Syrians succeeded in

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[20] Barak 318.

alienating almost everyone."[22] Their main offense was "just being there," so it was

logical that support would go to the "president" pushing to remove the Syrians.[23] This did

not work, though, and instead he lost support, though neither Randal nor Barak offer an

explanation for this. But, considering that the emigration, particularly of Christians,

reached its highest level yet, I am inclined to attribute Aoun's lost cause to the inability

of the country to unite under any cause at this point, as destruction was widespread and

blame could not be placed on one sole force. In fact, the crisis exacerbated by the duals

governments got to the point of threatening the entire region. Inter-Arab mediation began

in earnest, and a ceasefire and political compromise was encouraged.

This culminated in the Ta'if Agreement, in which the state was able to redraw its

previous power-sharing agreement on more legitimate and definitive grounds. This

agreement differed from the one in 1943. To begin with, it was a formal document

endorsed by a formal institution. It declared Lebanon "Arab in its affiliation and

identity," transferred parts of executive power, and applied a 1:1 distribution ratio of

parliament seats and high positions, while lower positions were to be filled according to

merit.[24] The army and law-enforcement institutions also lost their ambiguous roles,

befitting the state's more decisive foreign policy. Significantly, a national body was

created to seek an end to the religion-based division of government, which implies an

acknowledgement of the future problems that could come from this distribution of power.

There was, however, no time table set for when this system of government would be

replaced, so it seems unlikely that this will take a prominent place on the agenda anytime

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[21] Barak 319.
[22] Randal 196.
[23] Randal 196.

soon (or until perhaps another crises occurs). General Aoun rejected the Ta'if Agreement, but his armed defeat a year later allowed for the open implementation of the agreement. The remaining unsatisfactory elements of the agreement were the unclear clauses on the removal of Syria's troops, which implied a continued Syrian military presence in the country (which has indeed endured, to varying extents).

One major way in which the Lebanese state has been resuscitated and reconstructed is through the revitalization of formal institutions that support the state's infrastructure. Beirut is especially key in this rebuilding, and not just for its economic and commercial value. The recovery of the city to something of its former glory also suggests to Lebanese nationals living abroad that the state itself is recovering, and the skills and wealth of these people are needed in the revitalization process. This process has been facilitated financially by heavy borrowing, mostly from domestic banks. Attempts were made in the 1990s to reduce the growing national debt, but reform initiatives did not go through and the debt remained high. As of 2007, it was estimated at 186.6% of the GDP. Furthermore, the conflict in 2006 between Israel and Hizbollah (a militia group with the agenda of taking back Israeli-occupied regions in the south) cost an estimated $3.6 billion in damage, and prompted help from international donors. It also hurt the tourism industry, which was reviving and responsible for great economic growth. In January 2007, donors met again to pledge more support for Lebanon's continued rebuilding.[25]

Another contributor to Lebanon's reconstruction has been the formalization of the relationship between Lebanon and Syria. The influence of Syria in Lebanon has been legitimized in the region and internationally, and the Syrian government continues to

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[24] Barak 324.

have a powerful say in decision-making in Lebanon. Recently, in October 2008, the Syrian president issued a decree that open the way for full diplomatic relations with Lebanon, including an embassy, with ambassadors set to be established before the year's end. Given the attitude of Lebanese towards Syrians cited in Randal's 1984 book, one is inclined to wonder what the domestic reaction has been to these more recent steps towards full diplomacy with a government historically so disliked.

The rebuilding process has been fortified by the reorganization of the army following the disbanding of militias. Under its new organization, strategic efforts have been made to avoid the alliances, especially religious and regional ones, that split and undermined it during the civil war. At first, the new army command did not want to enlist personnel who were former members of the militias, but it ended up agreeing to include at least some. A draft was established in 1993, and since then it has become the most powerful armed force in the country. Like the state, the military has also lost its foreign policy of neutrality. This new role, combined with its increased strength, poses a potential danger to the military's ability to stay removed from politics, as it did in the period leading up to the collapse of the state.

Our analysis has stressed the importance of rebuilding trust and restoring civil society during the process of state reconstruction. In Lebanon, some rebuilding of civil society has been achieved, but there is still much to be done. The country is still composed of factions, both demographically and politically. Because of the nature of the fifteen-year conflict, in which factions were pitted against each other and outside forces allied with some groups and alienated others, blame for the tragedies of the past remains

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[25] *CIA: World Factbook: Lebanon.*

widespread. The scope of the civil war was such that 144,240 people were killed, 197,506 were injured, and 790,000 people were displaced, with about a million leaving the country.[26] In a country with a pre-war population of only 3.1 million, these numbers reflect just how many lives were affected by the violent, prolonged conflict, and just how much trust needs to be rebuilt in civil society.

Eighteen years have passed since the end of the fifteen-year war. Lebanon has made great progress, but it is still a weak state. Two of the main factors that contributed to its collapse, regional conflict involvement and a sectarian division of government, are still prominent in the government and society. For one thing, there is still domestic legitimacy in the causes of groups like Hezbollah, on the grounds of Israel's continued occupation of historically Lebanese territory. As this shows, as long as Lebanon continues to be mired in the conflicts of such a volatile region, which is the unavoidable case at this point in time, its stability will remain uncertain. It will also be difficult to restore civil society when the emphasis on factions is sanctioned from the top down. Hopefully, in the new Lebanon, progress will continue to be made to recognize the government as a means of uniting factions, rather than for inflating the power of one particular group, as was detrimentally done before the Ta'if Agreement. It is reasonable to doubt, given its hindrances, if the marks of prestige so visible to the world in 1960s Lebanon will be realized in Lebanon's near future. However, after having collapsed and been resuscitated under such unique circumstances, there is hope yet for this small state in the Middle East.

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[26] Barak 308.