

Bigoted Populism May Spell the End of Lebanon as a Modern State

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Brief Analysis

An existential battle is raging in Lebanon regarding the country's national character, identity, and prospects, with nothing less at stake than the success or failure of Lebanon as a modern project. Given that the country occupies a unique place in the wider Arab consciousness, the implications of its failure have the potential to reverberate regionally, especially since Lebanon's path has often foreshadowed later developments in the region.

Lebanon's pluralist composition was and remains a test case in the shaping of an Arab self-identity distinct from religious delineation. When the first meeting of the Arab League convened in 1945, Lebanon's presence as a founding member prompted one participant to wonder loudly "so, why have we not invited the Jews?" The Christian face of Lebanon continues to challenge some Arab perspectives while serving as a welcome departure from oppressive homogeneity for others.

Lebanon's acceptance of a quasi-Western lifestyle as a national norm also continues to place it as an exception in a region that can still view modernity—beyond the immersion in its material gadgets—as an affront to its religiously framed social order. Lebanon's multiple communities have—albeit unevenly—developed patterns of culture and consumption more in line with the Southern European model than with its regional neighbors, providing for the latter as a result an alternative model away from the posited conflict between modernity and authenticity.

Today, the unique features of Lebanon are under threat.

The success of mid-century Lebanon was in good part due to its agility in leveraging regional afflictions to its advantage. Capital flight and elite migration from Cairo, Damascus, and Baghdad—all then suffering recurrent and inconclusive turmoil—provided Lebanon with funds and talent for a cosmopolitan prosperity. Alas, with the PLO's leadership, as well as its rank and file, benefiting from comparable accommodation, Lebanon's classical liberal order attracted the catalyst of its own demise.

And after being salvaged from a devastating series of wars in the latter half of the 20th century, Lebanon gave signs in the 1990s and early 2000s that it might be able to restore its status as a pioneer in the region. Two factors, however, have proved to be serious, maybe terminal, obstacles to such a restoration.

The first is the carefully crafted Iranian control of Lebanon as a state and society, achieved through both open

political, social, and economic quasi-total stranglehold of Lebanon's Shi'i community and the covert penetration of other communities.

Yet the second factor, more subtle but equally if not more powerful, is the increasing abandonment within Lebanon of its founding project of political innovation.

Lebanon was created close to a century ago amidst a conviction shared by France, as the Mandate power, the Maronite patriarchate, and a Lebanese socio-cultural elite—predominantly but not exclusively Christian—that the trajectory of history is towards modernization. Instead of a mono-religious enclave that may have offered the Christians of the Levant a precarious refuge, the idea of a “Greater Lebanon” sought to manage the expected demographic shift, which was readily understood to be numerically detrimental to the Christians, by a process of integration of non-Christians (Muslims and Druze) into a political commonwealth informed by modernity and the values of the enlightenment.

Thus, in the course of its century of its modern existence, Lebanon provided a harbinger and a microcosm of the problématique that is coming to the fore of global civilization today. It experienced two separate potent trends: (1) a cultural-civilizational expansion of universal values and modern norms, albeit along an imperfect and fragmented pattern, and (2) a demographic shift that challenged the demographic dominance of the core population whose predispositions are supportive of the cultural ascending trend.

The communitarian arrangement initially adopted as a basis for political life in Lebanon, while providing the Christians with a slight edge, was proclaimed to be temporary. It was assumed—perhaps over-optimistically—that this arrangement would be replaced by an unqualified democratic system. Yet a century later, Lebanon is objectively farther from the goal of liberal democracy than at its inception.

However, the case can be made that the current failure of Lebanon as a project of modernity should not be viewed as final and intrinsic, but ought to be attributed to incidental and tangential factors, both internal and external—from the deficiency in modern political organization and the perpetuation of feudal patterns, to the heavy burdens imposed by regional conflicts. Patterns of horizontal integration—across communities, on cultural, economic, and political premises—challenging Lebanese neo-feudalism and pointing to the emergence of a shared national cycle abounded at all periods of modern Lebanese history—Mandate, independence, civil war, and Second Republic. It is also possible to point to political leaders who sought to break the neo-feudal mold, such as former President Fouad Chéhab and former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri.

The strength of the neo-feudal system, with its elements of kleptocracy, patronage, clientelism, and widespread complicity seems on its own daunting to the fragile resistance offered by horizontal interests. The added burden of the “Satrapy”, Iran's camouflaged occupation of a large political space in Lebanon, may indeed be responsible for the sense of despair in a modern Lebanon.

The real knock-out punch to the prospects of success of the project of modernity in Lebanon may however be in the deliberate abandonment of the original formula of an integrated pluralistic Lebanon in favor of the “confederation of communities” model—one that effectively declare the failure of the idea of “Greater Lebanon” while seeking untenable remedies.

President Michel Aoun and his son-in-law and putative successor Gebran Basil—despite occasional nationalist rhetoric—have both demonstrated an unwavering adherence to the idea of a “confederated” Lebanon. This is particularly visible in their repeated insistence of the need to “safeguard the rights of the Christians.” With Christians now a minority of the total population, Lebanon's equal political sharing system between Christians and Muslims has resulted in many Christian Members of Parliament owing their seats to Muslim votes. Aoun and others have suggested this situation amounts to a denial of Christian rights, and should be remedied by each community

electing its representatives, a system that would weight Christian votes over Muslim ones.

Aoun and Basil have flaunted successive power grabs for their associates as acts of championing the rights of their community—to over-representation. In his current pursuit of the presidency, Basil has embraced the provocative and bigoted rhetoric of his father-in-law, specifically targeting Syrian and Palestinian refugees.

This rhetoric is setting the tone for an escalation in Lebanese public discourse and eventual policy, which could easily develop into blatant racism. For example, the mayor of a majority-Christian town has recently declared that non-Christians will not be allowed to rent or buy property in his town and experienced no public backlash. Meanwhile, an entertainer, objecting to protests in refugee camps by Palestinians against new labor regulation measures, has called for them to be burned, openly invoking the Nazi “final solution” with no meaningful repercussions.

Bigoted populism has proven to be contagious. The damage to political culture in Lebanon is tangible, with Christian political rivals of Aoun and Basil driven to overbidding, setting in motion a vicious cycle of animosity, radicalization, and attrition of the common national discourse.

The new Lebanese Christian populists’ sense of empowerment is in harmony with Iran’s tactical interest in segmenting the Lebanese population along communitarian lines—both to strengthen its grip on the Shi’i community and to prevent Lebanese unity across community lines from challenging its control. While Iran’s intentions are compatible with the immediate political interests of Aoun and Basil, all parties must recognize that feeding into them will severely damage Lebanon as a modern state and, ultimately, will deny a continuing meaningful Christian presence in it.

By retreating from the promise of an integrated pluralistic Lebanon, as contemplated by its founding parties, the promoters of identity politics and bigoted populism abandon the most effective antidote to the potentially damaging cultural effects of the inevitable demographic shift—that of creating a community of values that welcomes all citizens, irrespective of religion and community. Populism is summoning tropes of supremacism and a recasting of the history of Lebanon and the region as a civilizational duel between Christianity and Islam. This “clash of civilizations” model may arouse passions and indeed secure the Christian electoral base for its promoters. But, while not reflective of the complex history of the region, it will amplify animosity and inter-community tensions in the Lebanese here and now, and will leave the Christian community isolated and vulnerable.

The existential conflict in Lebanon is not between “Christians” and “Muslims”. It is within the Christian community, between those who have despaired of the concept of “Greater Lebanon” and seek the questionable proposition in which untenable privileges are claimed to be permanent rights, and those who realize that safeguarding the rights of the Christians, and all Lebanese, is through the ascension towards a genuinely modern and enlightened Lebanese identity accepting of pluralism and universal values.

In an international climate that has normalized populism and is awash with bigoted and racist discourse, bigoted populism confidently advances in Lebanon, sliding the country away from the path chosen by its founders. To the detriment of all Lebanese, Christians and otherwise, and to the chagrin of enlightened citizens of Arab countries from whom Lebanon may have been the canary in the mine, the prospects of genuine modernity in the region may be receding. ❖



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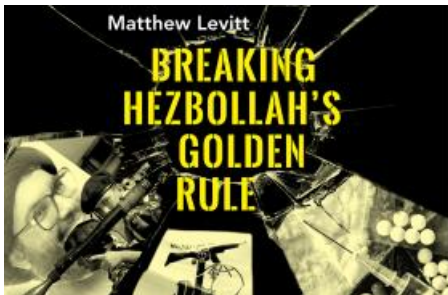
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