

The Necessary Illusion of a Democratic Lebanon

by [Hassan Mneimneh \(/experts/hassan-mneimneh\)](#)

Mar 6, 2018

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/hajt-lbnan-aly-whm-aldymqratyt\)](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Hassan Mneimneh \(/experts/hassan-mneimneh\)](#)

Hassan Mneimneh is a contributing editor with Fikra Forum and a principal at Middle East Alternatives in Washington.



Brief Analysis

In a few weeks, Lebanon will hold its long-overdue legislative elections — originally scheduled for 2014, with the Parliament, failing to enact a new electoral law, extending twice its own mandate. In a region where elections are often conducted with a pre-ordained outcome, the Lebanese elections have offered over the course of their history some notable upsets, with alliances sought to be secure dissolving, and with assumed underdogs prevailing. Lebanon thus maintains a democratic form, at least in its principal electoral exercise. Alas, the claim of democracy for this soon-centenarian republic — carved out of Ottoman provinces by France in 1920 — remains illusory. It is, however, an illusion that is worth maintaining.

A bonafide democracy is not compatible with the state of subverted sovereignty from which Lebanon suffers. In effect, Lebanon is under all but open Iranian occupation. It is a novel form of occupation — one in which Persian-speaking legions of the Islamic Republic need not saturate the landscape. Instead, over almost four decades, events were leveraged to reduce Lebanon to an Iranian satrapy which is accorded some level of internal autonomy, provided that the paramount interests of the Tehran overlords are assured. In its official pronouncements, the government of Lebanon recognizes two full-fledged armies on its territory: the first, al-Jaysh “the Army,” mirrors the conventional armed forces of other states, and is accountable to the political order; the second, al-Muqawamah (the “Resistance,” a sanitized reference to Hezbollah), ostensibly created to counter the Israeli occupation of Lebanon — an episode that ended in May 2000 — is the more potent and cohesive unit of the pair, and is unaccountable to any Lebanese authority, declaring instead its complete allegiance to the clerical leadership of the Islamic Republic of Iran. While its last significant incident with Israel dates back to 2006, the “Resistance” has used both hard coercion and less-than-subtle intimidation to insure that its will prevails in internal politics, while unapologetically declaring that any external action it undertakes — in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, or elsewhere — at the behest of its Iranian sponsors, shall not be questioned by any Lebanese party. While the ambiguous character of this occupation shields Hezbollah and Iranian interests from aggressive international counter-measures, the Iranian leadership, for its own internal purposes, has repeatedly highlighted their sway over Lebanon, often in the context of the “return” of Iran to its position of regional hegemony. One such pronouncement stands out: In May 2014, Yahya Rahim Safavi, an Iranian Navy commander, and adviser to the Iranian Supreme Guide Ali Khamenei, boasted that the Western borders of Iran are no longer in Iraq, but at the Mediterranean, noting that this is the third time the borders have reached that sea. The two previous instances were during the reign of the Achaemenids in the 8th century BC and that of the

Sassanians in the 7th century AD. Safavi clearly has a historical perspective, but it is neither "Islamic" nor "anti-Zionist." It is deliberately, even if obfuscated, nationalist and imperial.

Meanwhile, the official party line imposed on the Lebanese is that their country is part of an "Axis of Resistance" led by Iran, with the ultimate goal of eradicating Israel and denying the United States its ambitions for regional exploitation. For such "noble" purposes, the Lebanese are instructed to dismiss the indisputable facts of Hezbollah's responsibility for a long series of political assassinations that halted Lebanon's ascent to credible self-governance, as they are instructed to maintain vociferous enmity towards Israel. The Iranian subversion of Lebanese sovereignty is not limited to ownership rights over Hezbollah. A deliberate effort can be noted through which Iranian influence, via proxies of different levels of connections, penetrates the delicate communitarian equilibrium of the Lebanese Army. The national armed forces are thus not a challenge for the Iranian occupation of Lebanon; in more than one respect, they are indeed acquired assets.

The Iranian incursion into Lebanon would not have been possible had it not been for the gaps provided by the unaccomplished Lebanese identity. Lebanon shares with much of its region the undeclared reality of the primacy of factional communitarian identities over a common national one. In Lebanon, however, *ta'ifiyah*, (communitarianism), while often maligned in polite political discourse, is accepted as the basis for identity and politics. Somewhere between the social contract that binds state and citizens, and the constitution that defines a structured political order, lies the "National Pact" (*al-mithaq al-watani*) — the outlines of an agreement recognizing religiously-defined communities" as quasi-sovereign political entities, irrespective of the will of citizens thus identified by their nominal religious affiliation. In Lebanon's political system, while disagreement is tolerated in minor procedural decisions, any issue defined as major is void if any of the main communities is not represented in its articulation. As long as a community features competing political forces, this "National Pact" requirement is satisfied with the participation of one of them in the so-called "sovereign" decisions. However, the Shia community has lost its pluralism to the Iranian stranglehold; it is overwhelmingly dominated by Hezbollah and its vassal, the Amal movement. By withholding its agreement on national decisions, Hezbollah thus provides Iran with the ability to interdict any unfavorable action, limiting the need to exercise its coercive might against dissent. In a society segmented in multiple respects along communitarian lines, with a highly charged inter-communitarian discourse stoked by competing for information operations, Iranian diktat is recast as sovereign Shia decisions, and presented to other communities as necessary measures to counter (Sunni) radicalism and terrorism. The unaccomplished national identity of Lebanon thus reduces any electoral exercise into a measure of the success of communitarian mobilization.

While Iran can claim categorical influence over the quasi-totality of the Shia's voice in Lebanon, Saudi Arabia had a competing reach, more subtle but equally asymmetrical, over the majority of the Sunni community. In his efforts to assert a firmer policy, Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman has sought to jolt and upgrade his influence in Lebanon — dramatically pushing the Lebanese Prime Minister to resign while visiting Saudi Arabia. His maneuvers backfired, with the Saudi partial counter-balance to Iran in Lebanon severely damaged. While efforts at restoring the suzerain-vassal relationship are underway, the affected leadership of the Sunni community joined the ranks of Lebanese Christian leaders — with renewed visits to Cairo, Ankara, Paris, and Washington — in the quest to locate international supporters to avoid the dreaded necessity of acquiescing to Iranian suzerainty.

Collectively, these leaders — Christian, Sunni, Shia, and Druze — have been generally apt at managing relationships with external stakeholders seeking to balance their own rivals in Lebanon. The weak and structurally dysfunctional political system in Lebanon had served them well — enabling some benefits as patronage offerings to their base, and granting their inner circles ample profits through a mutually agreed-upon graft. Stability for the country and its region was sought through agreement within an informal "board" of international actors. At its most productive

phase, this “board” consisted of Syria as the “chief executive,” with Iran, Saudi Arabia, France, and the United States, as “full members,” and Israel with an “observer” status. Regional and international considerations have left this “board” with many vacancies, with Iran assuming a supreme role. What was believed to be a flexibility in operating the porous system for the advantage of local leaders has thus become the vehicle for Iran to seek, unchecked, a reconfiguration of the political order to seek to strengthen the model of occupation by local proxies.

Lebanon’s “National Pact” imperative dictates that political representation and authority ought to be divided equally between Christians and Muslims. In the context of the declining share of Christians in the population count, standing by credible estimates at well less than a third, this imperative is subject to two conflicting interpretations. The first considers it a requirement that state and government offices be populated by equal numbers of competent Christian and Muslim public servants, each representing the totality of Lebanese population — and thus, safeguarding a democratic substance to a system of unequal allocation. The other perceives the election of Christian candidates through Muslim votes a breach of the “National Pact,” demanding corrective measures to secure the “Christian rights” of over-representation. The electoral law in effect for the coming elections, incorporating elements of proportional representation, and carefully engineered to insure the re-election of established communitarian leaders, is presented as a compromise. In fact, it is a trade through which Iranian proxies will confirm and strengthen the upper hand in an exercise that further instills notions of communitarian segmentation as a basis for political legitimacy.

Despite its distinctly Western allure, Lebanon as an aspiring democracy is severely deficient in its political culture, with the concept of party democracy plainly non-existent within any of its political formations. All major political parties in Lebanon are led by dynastic chieftains or former warlords. New parties, some with elaborate modern political programs, are formed around a titular figure with the fervent but slim hope of ascent to equivalence with their leaders-peers. Both the Sunni and Shia leaderships have been reduced through the destructive homogenizing effect of outside sponsors eradicating pluralism. Less such effect has affected the Christian community. Nonetheless, even internally, this community has failed to develop any political formation with recognizable internal democracy. Herein may lie a fundamental impediment to genuine democracy in Lebanon.

With its sovereignty subverted by Iran, unaccomplished national identity, structurally dysfunctional political system, flawed electoral law, and total absence of party democracy, Lebanon is far from seeing ahead of it a clear path to democracy. Yet elections, including the coming legislative exercise in a few weeks, are a crucial element in maintaining the resilience of Lebanon as a polity, in the midst of regional dissolution.

The Iranian stealth occupation of Lebanon is a reality that many Lebanese, for diverging reasons, choose to ignore. It may be forcefully argued that the verisimilitude of political normalcy provides Iran with a cover for its occupation. In his attempt at shaking the Lebanese order, the Saudi Crown Prince may have wanted to lift the cover and expose the reality of Iranian occupation. Such action may indeed be an inevitable last course. It can be equally noted, however, that the edifice of Iranian control over Lebanon is built on leveraging minority stakes at multiple levels. Far from the almighty power, it seeks to project, it is a precarious balancing act that can be tripped by any alteration of its base components. Hezbollah may be more of a totalitarian fiction than a totalitarian reality, the stranglehold of the Shia community may be broken through a few courageous voices, the malleability of the political system can be re-purposed to undermine the hegemonic efforts, the pre-ordained elections can be challenged with any breach becoming a seed to defeat hegemony from within, and while no political party will voluntarily seek internal democracy, all can be shamed into gradual reform by a determined civil society.

The way out of the current impasse may indeed be a civil action. One feature of Lebanon, to counter the bleak but realistic portrayal, is that it does feature a well-developed civil society. Having been at the forefront of horizontal connections that challenge the vertical segmentation along community lines, Lebanese civil society, with a further

clarity of vision, may indeed be the agency to initiate the needed changes. For civil society to continue to exist and thrive, and for the potential of a positive sudden reversal not to be wasted, political stability is needed, even if the product of an illusory democracy. ❖

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology](#)

Feb 11, 2022

◆
Farzin Nadimi

[\(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology\)](#)



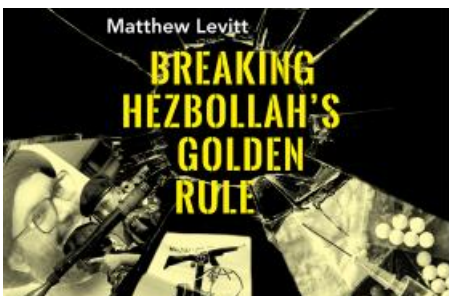
BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism](#)

Feb 11, 2022

◆
Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism\)](#)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[Podcast: Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule](#)

Feb 9, 2022

◆
Matthew Levitt

(/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule)