



## Beyond Islamists & Autocrats

### Lebanon's [Un]Civil Society

■ DAVID SCHENKER

Five years after the first uprising, the impact of the so-called Arab Spring continues to reverberate from Tunisia to Syria to Bahrain. While Lebanon lies at the geographic epicenter of this regional storm, the political unrest that has consumed so much of the Middle East has notably eluded the state. To be sure, Lebanon has experienced the profound effects of spillover from the war in Syria and continues to serve as a battleground for a long-standing sectarian proxy war between Riyadh and Tehran. Unlike so many other Middle East states, however, Lebanon has, by and large, avoided the kind of national political introspection and discussion of reform that has preoccupied so much of the region in recent years.

The absence of serious and sustained political foment in Lebanon is in many ways unsurprising. Despite widespread dissatisfaction with governance, both history and demography—the population is composed largely of Shiites, Sunnis, and Christians—have disinclined Lebanese to press for sweeping political change. With memories of the bloody fifteen-year civil war still fresh, many are no doubt wary of radical modifications to the current system. In addition, the stultifying postwar Syrian military occupation of Lebanon (1990–2005) constrained the

development of civil society, which is generally viewed as an agent of change.

Meanwhile, the 1989 Taif Accord, which helped end the war and established a powersharing arrangement, produced a system of government that reinforced sectarian patronage networks and loyalties above all else. According to one recent academic analysis, the result was a dysfunctional political system “that redirects individual loyalties away from state institutions and symbols and towards sectarian communities, and their political and religious elite . . . [This] makes it difficult for most people to even think of viable alternatives.”<sup>1</sup>

Much has changed since 2005, when former Lebanese premier—and leader of the local Sunni Muslim community—Rafiq Hariri was assassinated. The crime, believed to have been perpetrated by Syria’s Assad regime in tandem with the Lebanese Shiite militia cum political party, Hezbollah, sparked mass protests that ended the Syrian occupation of Lebanon. While the departure of the Syrian military did not eliminate the intelligence presence or the enduring influence of the Assad regime in Lebanon, it did open space for civil society, which began to flourish.

Today, Lebanon’s civil society is among the most vibrant in the Middle East. Yet the efficacy of its organizations in influencing change remains limited, with the confessional nature of Lebanon’s political system con-

tinuing to hinder democratic reform.<sup>2</sup> Entrenched sectarian interests fostered by the current system effectively oppose, stymie, and coopt a range of civil society activities aimed at undermining the status quo.

Unlike the other states already discussed in this series, Lebanon's current political dynamic is not best characterized as a contest between Islamists and autocrats. Certainly, Iran-backed Hezbollah—which operates both inside and outside the country's political framework—represents an Islamist and authoritarian ideology that leverages its arms, and at times its clerics, to intimidate opponents. But Hezbollah's political and ideological adversaries—represented by the March 14 coalition—are not autocrats. To some, they are freedom fighters pushing back against Iranian hegemonic regional ambitions; to others, they are bumbling plutocrats or, worse, sectarian zealots of their own type.

The war in Syria has stirred fears of Sunni radicalization, and combinations of local and foreign Sunni Muslims have perpetrated several significant terrorist acts in Lebanon. Nevertheless, apart from Hezbollah—whose prospects for total domination of a state with a 60 to 65 percent non-Shiite majority are somewhat limited—Islamists have limited local appeal. The good news, then, for advocates of liberty and better governance is that Lebanon has a deep bench of non-Islamist actors. The bad news is that their impact on the system is marginal.

## POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

As mentioned, Lebanon's political environment today is the legacy of the Taif Accord, which was brokered by regional powers. Before Taif, the state's political system was based on the 1943 National Pact, which relied on 1932 census results showing a Christian majority. Accordingly, Christians were afforded a strong presidency and a six-to-five ratio of parliament seats, which equated to 55 percent of the ninety-nine-seat parliament.

While Lebanon had not undergone a census since 1932, presumed demographic changes were incorporated into Taif. The accord preserved the allocation of senior portfolios—for example, a Maronite president, Sunni prime minister, and Shiite speaker of parliament—but downgraded the prerogatives of the chief executive

and reallocated evenly between Christians and Muslims the seats in an expanded parliament of 120 members.

Lebanon's electoral laws remain the subject of serious debate, and malapportionment and gerrymandering of districts are endemic and perennial. Nonetheless, in the absence of consensus, Lebanese lawmakers of all persuasions have generally not sought to fundamentally change the system. While some members of parliament have tried to tinker at the margins, the concern has been that significant changes would politically disadvantage one sect or another and destabilize the tenuous postwar detente.

Since the Hariri assassination, Lebanese have twice voted to elect parliaments. In 2005 and again in 2009, the pro-West March 14 coalition, led by Saad Hariri of the (Sunni) Mustaqbal Party, (Maronite Christian) Samir Geagea of the Lebanese Forces, and Walid Jumblatt of the (Druze) Progressive Socialist Party, won slim parliamentary majorities. This loose alliance narrowly defeated the Iran-aligned March 8 coalition headed by Hezbollah and the Free Patriotic Movement led by (Maronite Christian) Michel Aoun. In neither 2005 nor 2009, however, did the electoral victory translate into anything resembling a mandate.

Indeed, because Lebanese society and politics are so polarized, the legislature and government have been unable to pursue initiatives, controversial or otherwise, for the past decade. The lone attempt by the government resulted in disaster. In 2008, when the March 14 cabinet decided to remove Hezbollah's dedicated fiber-optic network in Beirut and fire the Hezbollah-affiliated official in charge of security at Rafiq Hariri International Airport, Hezbollah responded with a military invasion of the capital, killing one hundred people and forcing the government to stand down. Near-total governmental paralysis ensued and has persisted to this day.

The most visible sign of this dysfunction has been parliament's inability, since May 2014, to elect a president—a process that requires a broad consensus, with two-thirds of the legislature agreeing to a candidate on the first round of balloting. But the impotence has also extended to dealing with miscellaneous crises, large and small.

## NON-ISLAMIST ACTORS & ACTIVITIES

Today, more than 8,000 civil society organizations (CSOs) in Lebanon are registered with the Ministry of Interior. According to the Lebanese Center for Human Rights, that amounts to 1.3 associations per 1,000 inhabitants—about six times the number per capita in Egypt. (These registration regulations do not govern trade unions and syndicates, which fall under the purview of the Ministry of Labor.) Sporadically, elements of this vibrant civil society appear on the stage, organizing demonstrations and workshops, and preparing position papers and lobbying on controversial issues. The war in Syria, which deepened parliamentary gridlock and heightened sectarian tensions, has diminished, if temporarily, the advocacy role of Lebanese civil society organizations. Despite obstacles, however, their humanitarian activities and advocacy continue to have an impact on politics in the state. Some issues on which Lebanese civil society has intervened are briefly described below.

### *Electoral Law*

In 1989, the Taif Accords enshrined as the basis for Lebanese politics the confessional system, in which voters elect candidates—including in parliamentary elections—according to their sects. While not particularly popular, the system nonetheless endures, in large part due to the backing of leading political parties. Indeed, the Lebanese daily *Al-Akhbar* reported in 2013 that former interior minister and erstwhile civil society activist Ziad Baroud was “pessimistic about [the] acceptance [of proportional representation] among Lebanon’s political elite. He predicts that the prevailing political groups will never agree to such electoral reforms, because their direct or indirect interests are heavily vested in the status quo.”<sup>3</sup>

Back in 2012, an editorial in the *New York Times* reported that “a loose coalition of civil society groups, independent politicians and Lebanon’s president [Michel Suleiman]” had proposed “implementing a system of proportional representation to replace the cur-

rent majoritarian, or ‘winner-take-all,’ model.”<sup>4</sup> One of the more prominent CSOs pursuing this change has been the Lebanese Association for Democratic Elections (LADE), whose stated goal is to “reform the administrative and electoral systems to ensure an accurate representation and effective participation.” LADE hopes to advance this goal by proposing “alternative systems and laws in the field of elections, decentralization, and the laws leading to the abolition of political sectarianism, and advocate to adopt these reforms.”<sup>5</sup> In 2006, LADE, along with the Lebanese Transparency Association and the Center for Lebanese Studies, launched the Civil Campaign for Electoral Reform (CCER), and eighty-five civil society organizations have since signed on.<sup>6</sup>

Also in 2012, while parliamentarians were discussing changes in the electoral law, CCER organized a protest in Beirut, demanding a “more developed and just electoral law,” including the adoption of proportional representation.<sup>7</sup> Two protestors were injured—with one hospitalized—when the police broke up the demonstration. Three years on, and with the war in Syria well into its fifth year, Lebanon is more politically polarized than ever, making significant changes in the electoral law unlikely anytime soon.

### *Personal Status Law*

According to Lebanese personal status law, religious marriage, divorce, and annulment are the only option for adherents of Lebanon’s eighteen recognized sects. For Christian men hoping to marry Muslim women, for example, or couples seeking civil marriage, nuptials in Cyprus have traditionally served as the preferred work-around. This system has been reinforced by the Higher Shi’a Council and the Sunni Mufti, institutions that profit from state referrals. In 2008, after years of effort, lobbying by civil society organizations and committed individuals led to a change in the law that allowed “sect” to be removed from government registry records, theoretically opening a path to civil marriage.<sup>8</sup> In 2014, however, the changeover of ministers of the interior signaled a reversal of the policy, as the new minister refused to sign off on these contracts.<sup>9</sup> Today, in practice, civil marriage in Lebanon remains a challenge.

## *Human Rights, Domestic Violence & Human Trafficking*

During the Syrian occupation, effective interactions of civil society with state security were limited. In 2010, draft legislation on domestic violence penned by the Lebanese nongovernmental organization KAFA (“Enough”) was submitted to parliament and became the basis of the law passed in 2014. Though subsequently criticized for its shortcomings—including failing to criminalize marital rape—the legislation was unprecedented. KAFA subsequently provided training to the Internal Security Force on the new legislation, and launched a media campaign to advertise the role of police in preventing and prosecuting this violence.<sup>10</sup>

Along similar lines, in 2013, a CSO called the Caritas Lebanon Migrant Center (CLMC) signed a memorandum of understanding with the General Security Directorate allowing it to provide support in matters of human trafficking, including social, medical, and legal aid for detainees, as well as accommodation at CLMC safe houses for victims upon their release from GS custody.<sup>11</sup>

The Lebanese Center for Human Rights is representative of several Lebanese CSOs that work in the field of human rights. In addition to offering free psychological treatment and counseling to victims of torture in Lebanon, CLDH provides free legal aid to prisoners and the underserved, including victims of torture, refugees, low-income Lebanese, the LGBT community, and migrant workers.<sup>12</sup>

## *Refugees*

Because Lebanon’s government is gridlocked and has not signed the International Convention for Refugees, civil society organizations are playing a disproportionately large role vis-à-vis Beirut in providing services to Syrian refugees. A cursory glance at the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR) website under the heading “Who’s doing what where?”<sup>13</sup> gives a sense of the extensiveness of local CSO involvement in aiding refugees. Lebanese CSO activities encompass food security, education, community services, gender-based violence, child protection, water and sanitation, and health, among other sectors. In Lebanon, dozens of

CSOs—eighty-three according to one source<sup>14</sup>—implement projects funded by UNHCR, USAID, and other aid agencies and states to provide humanitarian assistance to the impoverished refugee community. Refugees are officially prohibited from working in Lebanon.

## *Illiteracy and Poverty*

Much like the support they provide to Syrian refugees, local CSOs also render significant assistance to impoverished and underserved Lebanese. A large part of this work is funded and implemented by organizations with a decidedly sectarian bent. Charity organizations such as the Rafiq Hariri Foundation and the Makhzoumi Foundation, for example, work primarily in Sunni areas; the Rene Mouwad Foundation provides its assistance in Maronite Christian areas; and the Hezbollah and Amal parties offer their aid to Shiites, as does the late Mohammed Hussein Fadlallah’s charity wing. To be sure, many Lebanese NGOs are more ecumenical in their approach to charity. Because charity is so closely tied to politics and constituent service, however, the tendency toward sectarian-based humanitarian assistance is likely to remain ingrained in Lebanon for some time.

## *Environment*

Lebanon is home to dozens of registered environmental organizations. Among the less political sectors, environmental NGOs were green lighted during the years of the Syrian occupation. Today, the government of Lebanon has institutionalized cooperation with these groups. Indeed, Lebanese law stipulates that the Ministry of the Environment maintain a National Council for the Environment, on which a CSO representative is a permanent member, to help shape national policy.<sup>15</sup>

These groups engage in advocacy and awareness raising, as well as other activities that are more typically the purview of the state, such as environmental cleanup, conservation, trail blazing and clearing, and tree planting. In August 2006, for example, in the aftermath of the war between Israel and Hezbollah, the local CSO Bahr Loubnan (Lebanese Ocean) usurped the traditional role of the central government by organizing, implementing,

and paying for the cleanup of 15,000 tons of heavy fuel oil covering more than 160 kilometers of Lebanon's beaches and sea floor.<sup>16</sup> While Beirut approved Bahr Loubnan's plan, the project was completed by nongovernmental actors.

## *#YouStink*

Perhaps ironically, Lebanese environmental CSOs were not at the forefront of the state's biggest environmental issue in recent memory, the 2015 Garbage Crisis. That summer, after Lebanon's principle landfill in Naameh closed, thousands of tons of trash started to accumulate on the streets of Beirut and throughout Lebanon, spurring large-scale popular protests, some of which were dispersed with violence. The demonstrations were led by a small cadre of CSO actors who called themselves *#YouStink*, joined by a disparate group of leftist groups, such as Bidna Nuhasib, Helu Ana, Ashab Yourid, Itihad al-Shabab al-Dimokrati, and Jay al-Taghir,<sup>17</sup> under the banner of what was called al-Hirak al-Shabi—the Popular Movement. Some sixty environmental NGOs, some of which existed only on paper, also joined the movement.<sup>18</sup>

For weeks, this nonsectarian coalition brought large crowds to Beirut to protest the inadequate government response to the crisis. The group initially unified around four demands:

1. A sustainable solution to the garbage, including the resignation of the minister of the environment
2. Decentralization of revenue streams—such as revenue from cell phone towers—to municipalities, enabling waste management to be dealt with on the local level
3. An end to the monopoly contract between the government of Lebanon and Sukleen, the private company responsible for trash disposal, an arrangement widely viewed as corrupt
4. The holding of parliamentary elections to hold politicians accountable for the crisis (back in November 2014, MPs had voted to extend their terms by two years)

The *#YouStink* movement did not succeed in compelling Beirut to meet its demands, but it eventually pressured the government into taking some positive steps. While the minister of the environment wasn't fired, for example, the garbage crisis portfolio was transferred to minister of agriculture Akram Shahayib, who developed a credible action plan to solve the problem in coordination with the CSO community. Some policemen were also disciplined for shooting rubber bullets at demonstrators.

More important than the garbage crisis itself, however, was the brief optimism that surrounded the *#YouStink* protests. The crisis mobilized, in an unusual if not unprecedented fashion, various segments of Lebanese society focused on a substantive, nonsectarian issue. For two to three months, *#YouStink* brought together communists, secularists, LGBT activists, Sunnis, Shiites, Christians, and Druze to translate frustration into action. By fall 2015, though, as the movement became more diverse, its focus broadened, diluting *#YouStink*'s concise message and undermining the cohesion of the group.

## *Corruption*

Public corruption, both real and perceived, is an enormous problem in Lebanon. Indeed, according to Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index, Lebanon ranks 123rd out of 168 states.<sup>19</sup> It's not difficult to see why; according to the World Economic Forum's Global Competitiveness ratings, public institutions in the state rank 127th out of 140—worse than Pakistan.<sup>20</sup> Corruption in Lebanon generates substantial popular anger and cynicism, and not everyone is resigned to the problem. In 1999, a Lebanese chapter of Transparency International, known as La Fasad, opened its doors in Beirut.

These days, La Fasad focuses on pushing laws to provide access to information—Lebanon's version of the U.S. Freedom of Information Act—through parliament. The effort is meeting with resistance from some quarters, but, as one lawyer involved in the initiative recently asked, "If they don't want to steal, why don't they let us watch?"<sup>21</sup> For a time, as part of the agreement between *#YouStink* and the government, the organization was al-

lowed to attend Shahayib's subministerial meetings dealing with the implementation of the trash plan. At this writing, La Fasad is working on developing a crowd-sourced monitoring website to keep tabs on how the garbage is being handled in the governorates. In the longer term, the organization is hoping to develop a transparent governance plan for Lebanon's promising gas sector.

## *March 14*

While Lebanese civil society organizations represent a prominent non-Islamist bloc, the leading non-Islamist actors in Lebanon today are the remnants of the March 14 parliamentary coalition. This loose alliance of the Sunni Mustaqbal party and Christian parties, including the Lebanese Forces and the Kataib as well as some smaller groups, saw its heyday from 2005 to 2008. While March 14 counts among its bloc al-Gamaa al-Islamiyah—a Sunni Islamist party considered to be the Lebanese chapter of the Muslim Brotherhood<sup>22</sup>—the coalition supports a vague, but generally moderate, pro-West agenda that includes in its platform, at least rhetorically, the disarming of Hezbollah. Ten years after the Cedar Revolution, this coalition is a waning force in Lebanese politics, increasingly divided and ineffective. Saad Hariri, who leads Mustaqbal, the largest party in the bloc, hasn't resided in Lebanon since 2011.

## NEITHER ISLAMISTS NOR AUTOCRATS

To be sure, Lebanon has its share of Islamists. From the Shiite side, Hezbollah for a time staked out extremely aggressive sectarian positions. In 1985, for example, the organization urged Lebanese Christians to convert—“We call upon you to embrace Islam,” read its manifesto. Since 2009, however, Hezbollah has conspicuously adopted more conciliatory language toward Christian Lebanese. Still, the organization, which maintains its political allegiance to Tehran, remains hostile to its local Sunni rivals and has actively supported the slaughter of Sunni Muslims in Syria by the latter's nominally Shiite Assad regime. In fear of Sunni militants, Lebanon's Shiites have largely embraced Hezbollah's role there.<sup>23</sup>

As for the Sunnis, despite a long tradition of modera-

tion in the community militant Lebanese Sunni Islamist clerics persist, which has prompted rising fears of growing domestic support for ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra. In 2007, an al-Qaeda affiliate took over a Palestinian refugee camp south of Tripoli called Nahr al-Bared, killing dozens of Lebanese Armed Forces soldiers. Ultimately, the LAF had to destroy the camp to save it. Reports of interdicted Sunni Islamist terrorist plots—targeting Shiites and the central government—are now ubiquitous in the Lebanese press.

Despite the existence of Sunni and Shiite militants, the state is not at present threatened by an Islamist takeover. Yes, some are concerned that Hezbollah's military preeminence in Lebanon could tempt the militia into a repeat performance of its 2008 invasion of Beirut. And fears endure that ISIS terrorist attacks will provoke a sectarian civil war. Fortunately, while many Shiites sympathize with Hezbollah and some Lebanese support Sunni Islamists fighting the Assad regime, the vast majority appear to reject religious extremism and embrace “democracy,” such as it is in Lebanon.

The civil war in Syria is contributing to growing sectarianism in the region to which Lebanon is not immune—a situation only being exacerbated by the longstanding proxy war in Lebanon, joined by Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shiite Iran.<sup>24</sup> The continued presence of the region's second largest Christian community and a relatively moderate Sunni population, however, serves for now as a firewall against a Hezbollah takeover of the state. Notwithstanding Lebanon's robust civil society, this dynamic promises continued political stagnation in the state.

Lebanon's healthy, secular, civil society is active both in providing services and policy advocacy and in promoting democratic values in the state, including calling for profound changes in the electoral law. While the CSOs are enthusiastic, however, local political elites and vested sectarian interests have, until now, stymied hopes for systemic changes in the Lebanon's political system and will likely continue to do so.

Unlike the George W. Bush Administration, which openly supported the March 14 coalition vis-à-vis the Hezbollah-led March 8 bloc following the 2005 assassination of Premier Rafiq Hariri, the Obama Administra-

tion has, in recent years, taken a hands-off approach to internal Lebanese politics. In part, Washington's distancing is related to fissures within March 14 that have diluted the coalition's local impact, but the shift may have also been influenced by the administration's outreach to Iran with respect to the 2015 nuclear agreement.

Regardless of the reasons, the ongoing war in Syria all but assures the United States will continue to eschew bold policy initiatives in Lebanon. Indeed, the sole remnant of Washington's once forceful Lebanon policy is the provision of \$80 million per year to the Lebanese Armed Forces and internal security agencies, some limited USAID humanitarian assistance work, and

refugee support. While the United States continues to target Hezbollah financing, it is no longer taking steps to try to undermine the militia's ground game in Lebanon. Indeed, in 2015, the State Department cut its only program to cultivate "independent moderate" Shiites in the country.<sup>25</sup>

For now, at least, Washington's focus is on security. Given the regional deterioration since 2011, maintaining the status quo of neither Islamists nor autocrats in Lebanon, while not an ambitious strategy, would seem prudent. Should the Assad regime emerge from the war intact, however, Hezbollah will be emboldened, and Washington will have to revise this tentative approach.

## NOTES

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17. These translate, respectively, as “We Want Accountability,” “Buzz Off,” “The People Want,” “The Democratic Youth Movement,” and “Change Is Coming.”
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