

Preserving the Unity of Lebanon by Federating Its Political System

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Lebanon is going through unprecedented circumstances that require joint engagement among all communities to find permanent solutions that ensure peace, prosperity, and unity for the country.

Retracing historic events, both pre- and post- establishment of “Greater Lebanon” in 1920, is a crucial step in identifying and addressing the roots of inter-community tensions that have consistently led to crises like the one being experienced today. These instances help highlight the potential for geo-cultural federalism to provide a new, solid path forward for the county.

Origins of Lebanon’s Tensions

Significant signs of the country’s current predicament were already visible with the establishment of the Qaim Maqamiyah in 1843, signaling the end of the Druze influence in Mount Lebanon and the beginning of a “geographic federation” structure. With the northern region governed by Christians and the southern region under Druze control, both groups governed minorities of the other religion. A number of historians have pointed to this structure—whereby some religious groups had control over others—as a major cause of inter-religious tensions, ultimately resulting in the massacres (civil war) of 1860.

In 1861, the “Five Great Powers” of Europe installed instead the autonomous “Mount Lebanon Mutasarrifate” as a subdivision of the Ottoman Empire through the Règlement Organique conventions. Over 80 percent of the Mutasarrifate’s population were Christian, and this period served as a model of “geo-cultural” federation that lasted until the beginning of World War I. Contrary to the geographic federation of the Qaim Maqamiyah, this period of geo-cultural federalism was qualified by historians as “the most prosperous and peaceful fifty years in the history of Lebanon.”

The Mutasarrifate stands in contrast to that of the French mandate of 1920 and the 1926 drafting of Lebanon's first constitution. Considering the multicultural nature of the recently established Lebanon, the "centralized" political system put in place by the 1926 constitution was counterintuitive and became the source of many misfortunes in the following century.

Since Lebanon's independence in 1943, this centralized system has led to continuous political deadlock, civil unrest, and even wars between Lebanon's Muslim and Christian communities. Case in point, every decade saw its own period of tension or violence, including a short-lived civil war in 1958, the 1969 Cairo Agreements forcing Lebanon to cede sovereignty over part of southern Lebanon to the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), military clashes between the Lebanese army and the PLO in 1973, and the subsequent fifteen-year civil war, ending with the Taif agreement.

Although the 1990 Taif Agreement was meant to begin a new era for the country, inter-religious frustrations clearly continued. The Christian community felt that the Taif constitution stripped away many of its privileges, making it subordinate to other groups. The Sunni community remained anxious that the privileges granted to them by the Taif Agreement were deficient, especially when they came to realize that the executive power of the Sunni Prime Minister was largely diluted by other government ministers. As for the Shia community, their exclusion from the executive authority was a major source of grievance, leading on many occasions to Shia groups imposing their influence by military force. Further violence emerged during the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah war and the political crisis and military clashes in 2007-2008, ending in the Doha agreement.

Although the 2008 breakthrough Doha agreement again attempted to address the months of political deadlock and civil unrest, this too was an imperfect solution. More specifically, the Doha agreement gave Hezbollah veto power over all government decisions, allowing the Shia community—who dominate the legislative branch—to assert their control over the central government after a 15-year period of predominantly-Sunni control and influence.

Despite the many iterations of political organization, at least one group has always felt left out of the equation, and that their communal voices were sidelined. Considering that the common feature of these two periods (1943-1975 and 1990-2022) is a centralized political system, the time has come to acknowledge that Lebanon's constitution, itself, is the source of the problems.

Envisioning a Solution

Lebanon is the aggregation of diverse cultural groups that have been living side-by-side but contribute their own particular histories, references, habits, cultures, and religious beliefs to develop the wealth of the "Lebanese identity." Concepts of patriotism and "national narrative" in Lebanon differ depending on Christian, Druze, Sunni, or Shia perspectives. Nevertheless, Lebanon is the homeland for all these groups.

Political history has proven that for any country to remain peaceful and become prosperous, its constitution must mirror its social or cultural structure. Considering the various religious and cultural groups' plurality of interests within Lebanon, federalism remains the most sophisticated constitutional option for establishing stability in the diverse country. One of the advantages of federalism is that it can put an end to the tyranny of any majority at the expense of minorities.

Developing a Successful Federal Model for Lebanon

A group of apolitical civil activists have established "Ittihadiyoun"—meaning unionist or federalist in Arabic—an association that has finalized a structure for a federal political system in Lebanon. This group offers solutions to the never-ending disputes among Lebanese communities based on four underlying pillars:

1. Preserve the unity of Lebanon as one country

2. Safeguard the cultural diversity of all community groups
3. Eradicate religious tensions and
4. Eliminate the displacement of local villagers.

Labeled "geo-cultural federalism," this structure is inspired by the Swiss federal system. Many of the areas that form Switzerland's 26 cantons are not contiguous—they don't need to border each other to belong to the same canton. For instance, there are towns geographically located within the Vaud canton yet constitutionally affiliated with the Fribourg canton. Other towns are enclaved within Fribourg but are affiliated with the Vaud or Bern cantons.

By applying the same principle to Lebanon, "geo-cultural" federalism could be developed by clustering and affiliating all municipalities that belong to their respective cultural groups—Christian, Sunni, Druze, Shia—to a single province regardless of their location. According to the Ittihadiyoun proposal, Lebanon would have four non-contiguous provinces with the federal capital located in downtown Beirut. This structure could eradicate religious tension while eliminating the displacement of minorities from their villages.

The geo-cultural federalism model allocates power mostly to the municipalities where residents will pay about 35 percent of their taxes, with another 35 percent of taxes going to the province and the other 30 percent to the federal government. Most socio-economic issues will be handled at the municipal and provincial levels. Topics that are common to the four provinces, including foreign/military affairs and monetary policy, would be entrusted to the federal government made up of four governors, one representing each province. Monetary policy will be assigned to an independent and well-regulated central bank. As for foreign and military affairs, all decisions to be taken by the federal government will require a unanimous vote; such a model will imply a "de facto neutrality," badly needed to sideline Lebanon from regional conflicts and help eliminate the inter-community tensions normally triggered by the meddling of foreign powers in Lebanese affairs.

The reality is that Lebanese citizens have already been practicing an implicit federalism within their "centralized" state for years. For instance, in Lebanon:

- There is no unified law for marriage as Lebanese marry and divorce in 18 different ways.
- There are several inheritance laws, one for each community.
- In many regions, local authorities issue decisions that supersede the constitution or the regulations of the central authority.
- Key political and administrative appointments are based on religious belonging rather than the credentials and professional merits of the candidates.
- Religious communities have developed distinct relations over time with regional and international powers, a disguised form of para-diplomacy which has contributed to the continuous interference by these foreigners in the Lebanese internal political affairs.
- Religious communities have had divergent positions regarding regional and international conflicts, which has exacerbated internal tensions among them.

In order to succeed in implementing radical changes to any political system, local, regional, and international circumstances need to converge. Yet the current timing seems appropriate, as most Lebanese agree that the political system in place is obsolete and ought to be changed. There is also a recognition that over the last eighty years, civil society has been trying to find solutions to the symptoms of the problems while ignoring the root cause of those problems. What Lebanese now need to acknowledge is that the centralized political system, which has been in place since 1926, is not suitable for Lebanon's multi-cultural society and has sparked recurring crises and wars.

Even the Taif Agreement, sponsored by the international community and effective at ending violence, planted the

seeds of continuous instability by reinforcing a centralized political system coupled with consociational democracy. This was translated into a clear federation of political leaders representing their respective communities and converting the system into a terrible “Religious Vetocracy” that nurtured corruption with no accountability or possibility of reform.

The international community, particularly the countries keen on helping Lebanon, have been falling into the “arrangement of necessity” trap by assisting Lebanon in finding patchworked agreements to the repetitive conflicts. But these agreements only aim to freeze and put off any military confrontation. If the “Friends of Lebanon” seek to implement a sustained peace for the country, they ought to seriously consider new proposals for constitutional change that reflect the real social and cultural structure of Lebanon.

The 20th century was the century when principles of democracy propagated globally, and the 21st century seems to be the century to defend minority rights within multicultural societies. These minorities could be preserved through federalism, confederalism, or partition. Federalism is a way to prevent Lebanon, one of the oldest multicultural countries in the world, from falling apart. Lebanese need to seriously consider the application of the “geo-cultural” federal system as the best way to eradicate corruption, apply accountability, safeguard cultural diversity, and eliminate religious tensions while preserving the unity of Lebanon. The situation in Lebanon is so tragic that in order to achieve this radical change, it is crucial for all factions to urgently engage in honest, dispassionate, and constructive discussions away from demagoguery in order to avoid disastrous consequences for Lebanon. ❖

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Keynote Address by National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan

May 4, 2023, starting at 7:00 p.m. (2300 GMT)

◆
Jake Sullivan

(/policy-analysis/keynote-address-national-security-advisor-jake-sullivan)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

2023 Soref Symposium Post-Keynote Panel

May 4, 2023, starting at 8:15 p.m. EDT (0015 GMT)



Zohar Palti,
Dennis Ross,
David Schenker,
Elise Labott

(/policy-analysis/2023-soref-symposium-post-keynote-panel)



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