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Chapter 1 - Introduction

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Introduction

Rosita Di Peri and Daniel Meier

At the start of the Arab uprisings, Lebanon was facing a critical political situation: In January 2011, the Lebanese government collapsed after Hizbullah and its allied ministers had made the decision to resign. This act was the result of tension between the Shi'a Islamic party Hizbullah and the March 8 coalition on the one hand and the rival March 14 coalition, led by *al-mustaqbal*, the Saad Hariri-led Sunni party, on the other. One of the bones of contention between the two coalitions was the United Nations' Special Tribunal for Lebanon charged with investigating the 2005 assassination of then-Prime Minister Rafic Hariri. The subsequent indictment of four Hizbullah militants required approval by the state, but the Shi'i party was ready to do everything in order to preserve its image, including overturning the government led by the late Hariri's son Saad. In June 2011, when the Arab uprisings spread across the Middle East and North Africa, Lebanon formed a new cabinet headed by Sunni politician Najib Mikati and dominated by Hizbullah. This small country in the Middle East was facing internal power struggles and seemed oblivious to the development of regional events.

In early 2011, however, simultaneously with the country's turbulent political events, several protests broke out in numerous cities in Lebanon. The protesters adopted the slogan of the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings, "the people want to topple the regime", but changed it slightly to "the people want to topple the sectarian regime" (Lebanon Wire 2011). The protests succeeded in bringing out only a small number of participants. They lacked strong coordination and consequently failed to have a major impact, including on the international media (Fakhoury 2011). During the summer of 2015, after a period of relative calm, the eruption of popular protests over the halt in garbage collection and of protesters calling for greater accountability of sectarian leaders echoed the protests in the region at large and gave a glimpse of the internal damage the Syrian crisis had caused. Besides the rift between the two main political coalitions, an even wider crack has opened up within a vivid civil society whose

mobilisation spread because of a growing distrust of political leadership and produced a profound crisis in the political system. There are numerous internal and external hazards, but so far both the system and the society has managed to adapt.

In the field of social sciences, the 2011 protests in Lebanon (and Lebanon in general) did not make for “marketable news”. Moreover, in the post-uprising period, scholars and analysts have increasingly focused on the regional dimension and attempts to find links and connections between the events of different countries and tried to understand why nobody was able to predict such major political changes. The role and the impact of the domestic dimension and the specific local features were strongly overlooked. The spasmodic need to find common explanations of the paths and trajectories of states in the Middle East has concealed the role of domestic politics, actors, and local decision making. One of the most investigated topics at the regional level has been the sectarian issue by means of a broader culturalist reading of the social and political process in the Middle East under the label of the whole region’s “sectarianization” (Abdo 2013; Byman 2014). According to these scholars, a never-ending conflict between Sunnis and Shia was simply a “natural” consequence of this state of affairs. This view has unfortunately become an all-encompassing meta-narrative producing simplistic readings of the regional processes and, at the same time, considering the role of domestic politics and actors to be irrelevant and giving room to pervasive geopolitical analysis.

This argument is of particular consequence to the case of Lebanon. Most of the analysis of that period, especially after the beginning of the civil war in Syria, has focused on Hizbullah’s involvement in the war (Alagha 2012; Alagha 2014; Spyer 2012), the Syrian refugee problem (Knudsen 2014; Dot-Pouillard and Pesquet 2015), Lebanon’s broader regional context (Heydemann 2013; Osoegawa 2013), or the role of the movements/parties that could affect the region’s geopolitical circumstances – for example, Hizbullah, Salafist movements, Palestinian refugees, etc. (see Omayma 2008; Salloukh 2013; Rabil 2014). The impact of the war in Syria and more generally of the regional turmoil

on Lebanon, however, is only a lens through which to observe how the state and society may adapt in order to cope with this situation (Di Peri 2014; Meier 2015b).

At present, the political scene in Lebanon is characterised by many constraints: a political vacuum caused by an inability to find agreement on the election of a new president; social mobilisation for waste management, which calls into question the accountability of decision makers; political bargaining between the two main political coalitions about the problems relating to the influx of Syrian refugees; and any other issue that can be politically divisive. All these constraints have revealed a picture of a country that cannot be reduced to being a mere proxy of Iran or Saudi Arabia. By contrast, the internal debate, the vitality of Lebanese political life, the multiplicity of its actors, and the variety of its topics – from women’s rights to election laws – show a country in transition that displays a capacity for continuous adaptation. The actors’ “path of resilience” (their capacity to face the many dangers threatening the country) goes to the heart of the questioning that led to this volume. How do the various sectors of Lebanese society manage external and internal threats, and how did this management – which can sometimes appear chaotic and uncontrolled – result in a form of adaptation and resistance to the local and regional constraints?

Assuming that the domestic dimension is crucial in order to understand the resonance and impact of external issues, this book provides an intimate picture of the country after 2011. The picture is based upon micro-transformations occurring inside Lebanese society (at different levels and from various starting points, including communities, social movements, and the Lebanese Armed Forces) or by reflecting upon issues that, even if they have a regional impact, are analysed from the perspective of their influence on the domestic sphere (Hizbullah, Syrian refugees, consociational system, etc.). Lebanon’s “exceptional” capacity to cope with a blurred and dangerous environment raises issues at the levels of identity, order, and the nation state. An examination of these issues forms the basis for the three main research questions in this book: What kind of identifications and identity resources do

the actors' practices reveal? How do political actors and social groups re-order interactions and norms in order to cope with recent changes? And how does Lebanon's "nationhoodness" still make sense (or not) for actors with regard to their actions and state symbols?

New lenses for old problems

Thanks to empirically grounded research that delves into recent events, the book explores several dimensions of Lebanon's post-uprising "exceptionalism" from different angles in order to renew perspectives on classical topics that include mobilisation, army, political movements, and refugees. At the core of those processes is the production of a collective identity that is currently affecting the entire region, which is worthy of exploration with respect to Lebanon as it covers most of the themes investigated in this volume. In so doing, we also acknowledge that Lebanon's socio-political trend can shed new light on developments and dynamics in the region.

The book's chapters focus on the post-2011 era in Lebanon and question history, at many levels, by proposing lenses at different scales through which to read historical facts and sectarianism in order to reshape the boundaries of society. All the chapters' narratives make sense and practices related to them for each case studied. The narratives can differ from the one to the next, they can have parallel discourses, or the practices can diverge. Furthermore, the facts on the ground will raise doubts about old categories, concepts, narratives, and common boundaries. To this aim, three main transversal "identity incubators" will be considered.

First of all, there is what we call "identity in practices". This label refers to personal, sectarian, or multiple belongings. Instead of identity, the notion of identification is more accurate to describe what we mean, as it underlines an ongoing process (Brubaker 2001). Beyond "sectarianism" (a term commonly used to explain the Lebanese context), social classes, regional belonging, and other

identity factors play a crucial role, and class community (Picard 1985) may be useful to re-assess the situation that some groups are currently facing.

Secondly, there is a major issue that we identify as the “social order”. It links identity with norms and values at the scale of a social community (groups) seeking to (re-)organise socio-political and mental spaces (of movement to carry out actions). The theoretical frame can be linked with the (b)ordering or re-ordering processes currently going on at different locations and levels of society (Meier 2015a) and regarded as a way for people to fix or re-arrange interactions in order to cope with a changing situation (Syrian refugees, socio-economic constraints, political vacuum, Salafist threats, etc.).

The third “identity incubator” is the issue of nation fabrication – i.e. Lebanon’s “nationhood” – and therefore its failure in both Lebanon and the Middle East, as revealed by the Arab uprisings and underscored by many commentators since the rise of the Islamic State organisation (Cheterian 2014; Daguzan 2015). How does “identity in practices” refer or relate to the state? In which narrative or ideology? After 2011, what kind of relationship exists between the state and (communal, class, regional, civil, or military) society? What about the nation today in Lebanon? “Nationhoodness” requires an examination of how people recognise themselves in the nation state: through classical symbols of the state (army, welfare, borders, or other institutions) or through the existence of powerful actors able to provide alternative identity structures (Hizbullah, Islamic or non-sectarian belonging).

The book is divided into two parts totalling seven chapters: “From identification to social (dis)order” and “From ordering to nationhood”. Each chapter incorporates the three “identity incubators” mentioned above that are strongly interrelated and ultimately serve to counter the prevailing arguments used to describe Lebanon before and after 2011.

From identification to social (dis)order

The result of the Arab uprisings in Lebanon, especially after the outbreak of the war in Syria, is that they seem to have brought identities to the surface. At the levels of parties, groups, communities, neighbours, coreligionists, and others, the Lebanese have overcome many difficulties to transcend apurtenance and challenge old legacies. On the one hand, because of a sectarian reading of the regional context, the narrative of sectarianism has blocked the “identities in practices” with the skilful use of rhetoric and repertoires. On the other hand, by contrast, it has offered a stimulus to re-think and re-imagine a new social dis(order). The upheaval inside and between the parties and communities, as well as the transformations in some regions and disputed border areas, have effectively brought to the foreground those processes that contrast with the catastrophic reading of the Lebanese context and shown, instead, its flexibility and adaptability: its “path of resilience”. This first part of the book, which resonates with the three “identity incubators”, mainly discusses these processes of resilience at many different levels.

With a focus on the border regions, Lorenzo Trombetta argues that local actors in Lebanon have been playing a crucial role by ensuring the exceptional flexibility of the Lebanese system. By analysing three different cases, Wadi Khalid, Tall ‘Abbas and Marj al Khawkh, the chapter presents how communities struggle to maintain social order in the midst of a precarious status, adapt their social interactions, and adjust their physical, cultural, and political spaces. It also emphasises that the concept of class community, beyond pure sectarianism, is able to describe the process of an elaboration of (local or supranational) identities by Syrians and host communities that goes beyond physical and mental borders.

Daniel Meier and Rosita Di Peri look at the Sunni community’s paths of transformation and adaptability and focus on the post-2011 era in particular. The identity-building process, which led to the consolidation of Lebanon’s Sunni community, especially after the end of the Civil War, and gave

birth to the phenomenon of “Harirism”, was challenged by the assassination of Rafic Hariri in 2005. From this moment on, Sunni “identities in practice” have emerged and underscored the crisis of “Harirism” – an entirely unexpected development in Lebanon. This shift paved the way for the rise of radical Sunni movements, such as that of Sheikh al-‘Asîr between 2011 and 2013. These movements display a clearly antisystemic stance capable of altering the social order, challenging the Sunni community itself.

Another case of “identity in practice” is analysed by looking at Hizbullah, which is at the core of Francesco Mazzucotelli’s chapter. Here, the focus on possible dissent inside the Shi’i movement, especially after its involvement in the Syrian war, shows how Hizbullah’s inability to listen to its internal disagreements can offer a fresh perspective to look at the party’s political dynamics. Hizbullah is not a monolithic bloc but composed of multiple identities that can challenge the internal and the external social order and simultaneously have an impact on the nationhood consciousness.

From (re)-ordering to nationhood

The second part deals with the process of (re-)ordering that is affecting Lebanon as it faces new challenges and problems and how this process relates to nationhood via narrative or ideology. Ways of belonging can sometimes be identified through social mobilisation at the start of and during the Arab uprisings.

Myriam Catusse, Marie-Noëlle AbiYaghi, and Mariam Younes call attention to the concept of “sectarian shadow” as part of their reflection on identities during mobilisation. As a means to take distance with “identity in practices”, the “sectarian shadow” underlines the nonconscious categories of thoughts strongly marked by sectarianism that continue to shape the social order, even among antisectarian groups of Lebanese citizens. It highlights the difficulties of going beyond those norms that bind together and rule actors’ social lives in Lebanon.

One of the ways that the citizens of Lebanon have found to express their collective belonging and their concern for nationhood lies in the popular empowerment of the national army. This institution, as Vincent Geisser clearly shows, functions as a symbol during times of trouble and deep uncertainty and a means to discredit political and sectarian actors. This return to the state is also shaped by a professional communication sector in the army that plays a role in identifying it as a guarantor of civility, situated far above the corrupt political scene and able to come to the defence of citizens and state borders.

Another means to establish a link between social order and nationhood can be found in Estella Carpi's chapter, which explores the effect of humanitarian technocracy on the welfare state system. She explains how welfare regimes have been experienced across Lebanon in the wake of internal and regional displacements. Thanks to the example of Beirut's southern suburb in the aftermath of the Israeli bombing campaign in 2006 and the issue of Syrian refugees since 2011, she shows how the postwar internationalisation of local welfare has created a management crisis because of the cycle of prioritising new emergencies. But welfare and aid appear to pursue differing social orders and curb cohesion and feelings of seamlessness, which generally define nationhood.

Finally, Are Knudsen's study of Lebanon's sectarianism in the face of the Syrian refugee crisis highlights the process of re-ordering national politics from another point of view. The lens of the state's non-camp policy with respect to the more than 1 million Syrian refugees in Lebanon reveals the chaotic political scene. The polarisation regarding the war in Syria provides an original tool to assess the contradictory visions of nationhood in Lebanon.

Towards new challenges

Between 2011 and 2015, Lebanon experienced a severe political crisis, one of the longer and more delicate ones since the end of the Civil War. Instead of falling into a new cycle of violence, this small country in the Middle East showed a rare, somewhat “unexpected” flexibility and capacity to adapt, especially considering the turbulent regional environment. This flexibility, however, is not without consequences: As the analysis developed by this book’s various contributions points out, Lebanon, its institutions, and population have been directly affected by the transformations that occurred during this critical period. New protests erupted and new actors emerged to challenge the state and its institutions, while old confessional legacies have remained and become stronger. All these factors shape the boundaries of the identity fabrication process and their connections between the nationhood legacies, questioning the (re)production of the social order. This tendency is not something new in Lebanon, a country capable of reinventing itself even after violent and dramatic events.

However, despite the many ways that social actors have found to adapt to the challenging (local and regional) environment, Lebanon appears to be walking a tightrope. Its capacity to cope with several types of danger, which some describe as the power of the weak, can also be a trap, a sort of self-confident illusion. Playing with fire, as the sectarian leaderships seem to be used to doing by threatening and weakening state institutions as well as state legitimacy, may provoke unpredictable and unintentional results. While there is no doubt about the renewed or reproduced powers of the *zu’ama* (Kingston 2013; Cammett 2014; Salloukh 2015), the sprawling presence of sectarianism is something discussed by all of the authors in this book – whether in relation to garbage protests, the army, Syrian refugees, or humanitarianism – from the variable perspective of “identity incubators”. This lens has been adopted to shed new light on actors’ capacities at the scale of their daily life, in such changing times, as well as on the dynamic aspect of identity-building processes.

This volume has sought to illuminate a few visible (and some less visible) social processes at stake in Lebanon but concludes with the paradoxical result of mixed feelings: On the one hand, the state is

constantly downgraded and its capacity to act threatened by powerful actors on the political scene. On the other hand, social actors seem to act as moral guardians of a sinking ship called Lebanon when they build new relationships between each other or with the old and new refugees. Many challenges remain and are immediately visible: electing a new president, setting up a new legislative electoral process, and more broadly re-legitimising politics in the eyes of the country's citizens. But the highest priority may be a return to normality. When abnormal times become "normal", what is taken for granted needs to be reshaped, rethought, and rebuilt together. Contrary to the end of the Civil War in 1990, the next step for Lebanon will be to put opposing views of the nation and the state around the same table. Thus, there may be an opportunity to reconfigure the Lebanese Republic after the end of the war in Syria. Sadly, in any realistic scenario, this will only happen after a slow return to sectarian "business as usual", like what happened with the "national dialogue" gatherings after the popular protests of 2005 and the Doha Agreement in 2008. Therefore, the question is not whether another social movement will clamour for political leaders to be accountable or for the protesters to be represented in a new deal but when exactly this "second" uprising will take place.

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