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Mediterranean Politics forthcoming

Stretching the margins: identity, power and new ‘frontiers’ in Lebanon’s Maronite community

by Rosita Di Peri, University of Turin

Introduction

Lebanese communities are complex entities. Broadly speaking, they regulate individuals’ lives while simultaneously being the pillars of the so-called consociational power-sharing system – the formula which the country’s political life is based. In this system, where the divisions between communities have well-defined and demarcated borders, individuals’ and groups’ prerogatives are reflected in the existence of specific communitarian institutions, such as religious tribunals and personal status legislation. The institutionalisation of communities within the consociative system has contributed to politicising them (Rabbath 1986). Over the years, communities gradually became spaces where the dynamics of production and the reproduction of power, as well as techniques of social control, manifested and perpetuated themselves.¹ Such spaces are clearly bound by social and religious laws that make them places where identities seem to be crystallised, and any attempt at change is difficult. In these spaces, specific techniques of control have been refined and mostly implemented as a result of combining the communitarian system at the religious and social levels and the consociative system at the political level (Salloukh et. al 2015). None of the 18 Lebanese communities has been exempted from that logic, and the Maronites play a major role in the socio-political Lebanese system. This pre-eminence has made the techniques of control over its members even more stringent because because of this community’s pervasiveness across the national territory and the necessity to continue to set forth a double narrative: social cohesion among the Maronites and economic success for them. The sectarian elites needed these narratives at the heart of ‘maronitism’² to contain dissent and present the Maronite community as politically and economically dominant in Lebanon. However, despite their efforts to maintain control over its members and the supremacy over the consociational system, these narratives were strongly challenged in the post-Taif period when a process of resizing affected the community at demographic, political and economic levels (Hagopian 1989; Picard 1996; Di Peri 2016).

While assuming, as a starting point, that communities in Lebanon are ‘spaces’ (Agnew, 2011; Lefebvre and Nicholson-Smith, 1991) where various techniques of domination and control are reproduced to prevent their members from questioning the religious, identitarian or political

¹ The main reference here is to the work of Antonio Gramsci and especially his concept of hegemony, particularly as it was developed in “La questione meridionale” (2005) and his “Quaderni dal carcere” (2014).

² Maronitism is the political and socio-economic strategy promoted by the Maronite community and is characterised by the imposition of a pervasive political presence, conservatism and an economic policy of laissez-faire. See Hagopian (1989).

hegemony (Traboulsi, 2014; Salloukh et al. 2015), the contention here is that the Maronite community's resizing process has created in-between border spaces within this community, where new discourses aimed at questioning this system of control arise. To justify this in-between border spaces' relevance to understanding discourses of dissent, the analytical category of liminality will be explored. This category was first introduced in anthropology by Van Gennep (1909) and gradually adopted more broadly in the social sciences – particularly in border studies. If, as Rajaram and Grundy-Warr (2007) assume, liminal spaces (which they call *borderscapes*) are places where the relationship between space, lived experience and power transforms and modifies reality, this concept will be particularly useful in our case study. According to this view, such liminal spaces, unlike static and fixed spaces, are a “context from which discourses and practices of ‘dissensus’ can originate, thought which it is possible to think of alternatives to the static exclusivity of landscapes of dominant power (counter-hegemonic borderscapes)” (Brambilla 2015, 24).

The focus on the concept of in-between border spaces as a direct expression of liminality will help answer the questions of why counter-hegemonic discourses arise in marginal spaces and how these spaces become liminal. We argue that the manifest incapacity of the Maronite elites with regard to *bordering* and *ordering* (Popescu 2012) the ‘margins’ of their own community, especially after the civil war, is weakening the elites’ control over these new spaces: they became “arenas” where dissent may coagulate and new social realities free from the community control system can emerge. They are not just physical but also mental or symbolic spaces where individuals question the sectarian system and their own belonging to it (Yuval-Davis 2011).

To illustrate these dynamics within the Maronite community, the in-between border spaces will be analysed by using data from fieldwork conducted in Lebanon between 2014 and 2016, especially in a number of Maronite villages of the Keserwan District. In addition to observations, about 70 in-depth interviews with residents, as well as politicians (both Maronites and non-Maronites) and clergymen, were carried out. The sample was built starting from a stay in such villages, daily interaction with their inhabitants and an observation of the social and political environment. Several interviews were also carried out with politicians and religious representatives at the national level. It was particularly interesting to retrace some traits of the “maronitism” that is at the heart of the (political and religious) elites’ process of control over members of the community.

The paper is organised as follows: the first section offers an overview of the key aspects that mark Lebanese communities as spaces where dynamics of domination and control perpetuate themselves. In the second section, the concept of liminality and its impact on defining the in-between border spaces will be analysed to show why this analytical lens is particularly useful to understanding the recent transformations that have affected the Maronite community, especially after the civil war,

when the marginalisation process became evident. In the third section, the elements that led to the marginalisation of the Maronite community on the socio-demographic, political and economic levels will be explored. We will also reflect on how this process calls into question the mechanisms of control at the political (deterioration of the relationship between elites and the base), social (increasing feelings of anti-communitarianism) and economic (rise in inequality) levels. Consequently, the final section's focus will be on the counter-hegemonic discourses that arise in-between border spaces within the Maronite community – especially on the political-religious nexus.

Communities as “spaces” of domination and control

In Lebanon, communities vary in time and space and are not only physical but also mental “spaces” where religious, political and social dimensions co-exist. The Arabic word *ṭā'ifiyya* (sect) expresses the communities' many facets very well. While the Lebanese recognise themselves as citizens with rights and duties towards the state, they establish close ties and relations with and devote themselves to their community. It is inside their communities that they solidify the relationships of trust and exchange of favours that often make the communities (and not the state) the point of reference for the Lebanese. Resolving personal and collective problems is accomplished by asking for the (religious or political) community leader to intercede in order to solve a problem in exchange for a vote or a favour. This practice led to the political and religious leaders' goals converging, namely to maintain control over their members by keeping them connected to the community through religious rules and moral bonds. This attitude develops and is embodied in the historical processes that have led to the settlement of closed local communities very jealous of their own autonomy over their members in both the personal status and religious spheres (Joseph 1997; 1999).³ Consequently, sectarianism is seen as a system of power with strong patriarchal elements – a pervasive and structuring identity marker capable of obscuring other identity markers and a sense of belonging (Makdisi 2000). This system reproduces, adapts and renews itself. Like other systems of rules and values, it is resilient and changes form but does not change its substance, and it adroitly adapts to changing domestic and international conditions. In short, paraphrasing Heydemann (2004), it contributes to maintaining stable ‘networks of privileges’ that form the basis of a reproduction of the balance of power in neo-patrimonial systems. This was particularly evident in the post-war period, when the communitarian option again prevailed (Picard 1994; Kiwan & Beydoun 1994). The sectarian leaders adopted a

³ These courts vary from community to community but have the common characteristic of enjoying great autonomy that, *de facto*, escapes control of the state's judiciary bodies. The Lebanese Court of Cassation, Lebanon's highest court, is the final arbiter of disputes and is responsible for examining the compatibility of religious codes with the public order. However, it has long interpreted this responsibility as being limited to examining jurisdictional and procedural rather than substantive religious rules.

pragmatic approach that would allow them to protect their own interests by preserving the *status quo* and increasing the degree of control exercised over members. This also makes trans-confessional alliances between political leaders possible. Of course, this process is also kept going by the predominance of culturalist and modernist readings of the communitarian system: the dominant sectarian elites were able to impose a sectarian discourse that, all too often, concealed the one related to class (Dubar 1974; Picard 1985). According to this view, Salloukh et al. (2015), for example, argue that the weakness of the Lebanese state in the post-war period and the sectarian system's ability to appropriate class claims allow the sectarian system to exploit the Lebanese state as a tool for its perpetuation and consolidation and blocks the emergence of trans-sectarian and non-sectarian movements. In the same vein, Kingston (2013), analysing three advocacy networks in the field of gender, environment and disability, argues that the Lebanese sectarian democracy model produces circuits of path dependence that create powerful obstacles to change, especially for civil society. Analogous to the previous arguments, Cammett (2014), moving into a post-culturalist and primordialist vision of sectarianism, asserts that sectarianism is a fundamentally political phenomenon rather than the expression of essential cultural differences. In analysing Lebanese parties' provision of welfare service, Cammett argues that both sectarianism and service provision create the conditions to include or exclude groups, which shows how and to what extent sectarianism is able to reproduce techniques of domination and control.

However, some unexpected events can affect the structure of communities challenging the relationships of strength, questioning the techniques of control and domination and creating new liminal in-between spaces. This is the case of the marginalisation process that affected the Maronite community after the civil war. If, as Traboulsi (2014, 19) argues, we assume that the Lebanese confessional system's configuration finds its *raison d'être* in the communities' unequal access to political and economic resources, changing socio-economic conditions can enable the creation of new spaces at the margins of the confessional system. Here, identities become more fluid and the borders between communities more porous, thereby strengthening Maronite actors' agency in liminal in-between spaces and stimulating their counter-hegemonic discourses.

Liminality as a counter-hegemonic discourse

Arnold van Gennep introduced the concept of liminality to the anthropological debate in 1909 to analyse the middle stage in ritual passages. One of the central arguments he developed was that transition is a central "fact of life" and that transitional moments are crucial to understanding the transformations of a group. The focus on process(es) became one of the distinctive points of subsequent studies on liminality, which made the concept very popular. One of the leading scholars

who contributed to its success was Victor Turner (1982). According to Turner, the concept of liminality plays a central role not only in stressing the relevance of in-between periods, namely periods between one phase and another, but also in understanding how people react to “liminal experiences” – in other words, how individuals react to liminality and are shaped by it, and how liminality influences their life. Accordingly, in Turner’s view, the focus is not only on the structure but also on the agency, which, in some specific periods (the in-between periods), can question or change the structure itself. As Thomassen (2009), for example, points out, liminality serves “to conceptualize moments where the relationship between structure and agency is not easily resolved or understood” (p. 5). Liminality, indeed, is something that is possible to apply to any “betwixt and between” (Turner 1967) situation or object, to both space and time. This broader definition of the concept made it very popular on a different scale. For example, it was possible to apply the concept of liminality at the level of individuals, groups, the whole society or some other scale by considering the time variable to be a specific moment, a period or an entire epoch.⁴

The most interesting aspect of liminality, especially in its development across years and disciplines, is the fact that this concept can capture the changes on the interstices – in-between spaces – to explore, for example, those mechanisms that challenge fixed or imposed hierarchies or stable identifications (Bhabba 1994). In this last meaning, liminality is able to capture the experiences of minorities or marginalised groups, as well as individuals or groups in marginalised positions. In addition, it can grasp important moments of transformation in the transition from one worldview to another. Jaspers (1957), for example, in his conceptualisation of “axial age”, defines liminality as an in-between period between two worldviews in which the old order disappears and a new one is configured. In his conceptualisation, the reflection is not on the centre of power but on the margins – the periphery of the system(s) of power. Liminal spaces or experiences can challenge views, hierarchies and dynamics: as a moment of creativity, liminality potentially provides an occasion to renew society and relations among groups.

The more the concept became relevant in social sciences, the more it became a key aspect of the discussion about power and space. As Brambilla (2015) rightly points out when reflecting upon the liminal concept of borderscapes, “[it] highlight[s] the constitutive role that borders in modernity have played in the production of political subjectivity, thereby showing the potential of the borderscape as a space for liberating political imagination from the burden of the territorialist imperative while opening up spaces within which the organisation of new forms of the political and the social become possible” (p. 18). According to this view, liminality is a way to conceive and to see power but, mainly,

⁴ Of course, there is a significant risk that the concept of liminality becomes overstretched. For example, when we move from individuals and groups to the entire society or to the international system, the danger is determinism, namely that liminality can be found in every place and experience across time and space.

to explore how political subjects experience living on the border, in the in-between spaces. The analysis of how political communities react to liminal experiences is important to understanding how the agency is able to have an impact on the structure, for example, by generating counter-hegemonic discourses.

In this last view, of course, liminality assumes an important role within the framework of IR by questioning the positivist-rationalist theory and giving more room to non-state actors, for example. The concept in this meaning “respect[s] the fundamental polyvocality of the world, resisting, instinctively the attempts to overtly unify political processes and subjects by forging them into a hierarchical order” (Malksoo 2012, 483). From this perspective, the concept of liminality makes it possible to grasp what happens at the margins of the international system: this is, according to this view, the only way to better understand what is happening at the core.

The discussion about the concept of liminality has strong implications for our case study. First of all, there is an assumption that it is crucial to look at what is happening at the margins (in-between borders spaces) in order to understand what is happening at the core after an event that had a strong impact on the structure itself; second, liminality is a formative experience in a given context or group able to provide new structures and new rules; third, liminality puts the agency of the marginal actors at the core, and they can act as counter-hegemonic subjects stimulating counter-hegemonic discourses; finally, it helps to comprehend the power structures among groups.

Exploring liminality among the Maronite community after the Taif Agreement (1989)

To explore liminality among the Maronite community, it is necessary to consider the key elements that have contributed to spreading a certain image of this community both inside and outside Lebanon. This image has prioritised the community’s “core” and strength and marginalised the periphery. This was possible, we argue, thanks to the “marriage” between the political and religious elites. This alliance has contributed, on the one hand, to bolstering a specific Maronite identity and image (maronitism) and, on the other hand, to consolidating control over the community and its members. These elements are crucial to understanding how, and to what extent, the process of marginalisation that affected the Maronite community after the civil war has had a relevant impact on the relationship between the centre and the periphery of the community. The marginalisation process has given new visibility to the “problematic margins” of the community that the “core” previously tried to conceal. The Maronites have been considered emblematic of Lebanon’s wealthy and *laissez-faire* economy (Labaki 1998; Traboulsi 2014). Awareness of their status as one of two leading communities, combined with the fact that they represent the richer stratum of the Lebanese population, has strengthened the community’s sense of superiority and reinforced its leadership skills. The Maronite

community emerged from the National Pact of 1943⁵ as the most powerful group from a political and economic point of view. The support this community has always received from the West, and from France in particular (also economically), helped to boost its members' prosperity.

One of the aspects in which the Maronite community had enjoyed superiority before the civil war was demographics.⁶ Lebanon's consociative system is based on a delicate communitarian balance in which demographic weight is essential. After the creation of Greater Lebanon in 1920, the Maronites became slightly demographically predominant (Zamir 1985), and this went unquestioned until the 1960s when the demographic and political rise of the Shiite community (Ajami 1986) caused the Shiites to prevail over the other communities in the late 1970s (Faour 2007). After the civil war, the loss of demographic centrality⁷ became an important part of the rhetoric of Christian leaders, and of the Maronites in particular; some, like Samir Geagea, the leader of the Lebanese Forces, conducted statistical surveys to show how, for instance, Christians would still be in the majority in Lebanon if the diaspora and their voting rights were taken into account.⁸

Another field of pre-eminence had been the political sphere, where the Maronites elites had long enjoyed their superiority. This changed, however, when the Taif Agreement (which they rejected) weakened their status by basically "institutionalising" their marginalisation. The agreement also led to deep divisions within the community and between the Maronite Church and the Holy See, which looked favourably upon an agreement that would put an end to the civil war (Irani 1988). The Taif Agreement ratified a *de facto* situation: on the one hand, the loss of weight of the Christian communities, and of the Maronites in particular, and, on the other hand, the rise and strengthening of the Muslim communities, particularly the Sunnis.⁹ The Taif compromise had a profound impact on the inter-confessional balance. The equal status of Christians and Muslims and the attempt to divide power equally among Maronites, Sunnis and Shiites altered the communities' perception of the distribution of power and the nature of their relations with their leaders. Before the civil war, Maronite pre-eminence had caused considerable frustration among the Sunni and Shiite Muslim communities,

⁵ The National Pact was an (unwritten) agreement that legitimised the power of the Maronite and Sunni communities at not only the social but also the state level. The National Pact outlined a power system based on representativeness (also in demographic terms) of the communities, which favoured the Christians. See, among others, Assaf (1999) and Zamir (1985).

⁶ The last regular census in Lebanon was carried out in 1932; since then, the demographic question has been used instrumentally by all the political parties in the country.

⁷ In 'Christian' surveys, the comparison is between Muslims and Christians as a whole and not between communities because this would further underline the Maronites' marginalisation. Today, Christians make up about 34% of the Lebanese population. Lebanese Information Center (2013).

⁸ Interview, member of the Lebanese Forces, Maarab, 22 November 2014.

⁹ The main points in the agreement echoed the 1943 National Pact, except for a new power-sharing arrangement between communities, which introduced a new political and institutional setup. The country's (Maronite) president was replaced by the (Sunni) prime minister as the highest political authority in Lebanon; the powers and term of office of the (Shiite) president of Parliament were increased, and the number of deputies was increased to 128, equally shared between Christians and Muslims.

but after the Taif Agreement, the change in the balance of power in favour of the Sunnis reduced the role of the Maronites inside Lebanese institutions, although their overall political weight was still substantial.

The rejection of the agreement resulted in the Maronites' decision not to participate in elections in 1992 and 1996 and ushered in a process of self-marginalisation and increasing fragmentation within the community. This became apparent after 2005: following Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon in May of that year in the wake of protests over Hariri's assassination, General Michel Aoun's return from exile and his decision to sign a Memorandum of Understanding with Hizbullah in 2006 exacerbated intra-community infighting.¹⁰ Many Christians, especially those involved in the March 14 Coalition, unlike those of the March 8 Alliance, which includes Hizbullah and Aoun's party, stood up against the memorandum, which was viewed as an attempt to neutralise the opposing coalition (Khashan 2012, 79–85). While diverse alliances and the Christian leaders' vibrant exchanges were seen as examples of internal democracy,¹¹ the fragmented political spectrum became a limitation. This aspect also became relevant in connection with the religious-political nexus. As explained before, the alliance between political and religious leaders can be considered a critical part of maintaining domination and control among the Maronite community. Although not only patriarchs but also bishops have been involved in politics, the patriarchs have often played an important role, either by taking a stand in favour of one or another candidate or by taking a position on issues relevant to both the community and the country as a whole.¹² Patriarch Sfeir, who dominated the Maronite scene from April 1986 until his resignation in February 2011, setting the stage for the election of Bechara Boutros al-Rahi in March of the same year, was strongly involved in politics through his anti-Syrian positions (Baroudi & Tabar 2009). These positions were transformed into public statements against the Free Patriotic Movement, the party of General Michel Aoun.¹³ During the 2009 election, the patriarch had appealed not to vote for the March 8 bloc, to which Aoun belonged, because of Aoun's alliance with Hizbollah, which had support from Syria. Such positions, as well as interference in other Maronite organisations, caused him to be alienated from many of the members of his community¹⁴ and, above all, from Aoun's supporters.

¹⁰ This is not new as intra-Maronite competition has always existed.

¹¹ Interview, political journalist, Beirut, 21 November 2014; interview, Lebanese parliamentary, Beirut, 19 November 2014.

¹² One of the most interesting pieces of evidence is the creation, in May 2003, of the Qornet Shehwan Gathering coalition. Its aim was to increase Christian participation in the elections in response to the negative effects of the amended electoral law, which they had strongly opposed. The gathering took on a more official tone only after the first Council of Bishops' statement and consolidated itself as the political wing of the patriarch.

¹³ After the 2009 elections, Sfeir declared: "I regret that the winners in the June 7 elections [haven't turned out to be] winners, while the losers [haven't turned out to be] losers" (The Daily Star, 2009).

¹⁴ Interview, bishop, Jbeil, 25 May 2016.

All in all, Maronite leaders, as in the past, have since demonstrated their inability to compromise on crucial political issues, and the divisions between them have become systemic and hard to overcome. Notable examples include the difficulties in reaching an agreement on the election of the president¹⁵ and, after 2011, the lack of dialogue on the Syrian refugee issue.¹⁶

Finally, in order to understand why liminal in-between spaces inside the Maronite community question the Maronite elites, we need to look at the decline of the Maronites' quality of the life after Taif. The civil war, of course, contributed to exacerbating a situation that, in the period immediately preceding the civil war, had been problematic. In that period, the economic debate was dominated by two contrasting visions: on the one hand, supporters of free trade wanted to turn the country into a regional "hub" for services and commerce; on the other hand, there were those who advocated a diversified economy based on domestic agricultural and industrial capacities (Gates 1998). The former option, which received strong support from the Maronites, especially under the presidency of Fuad Chehab between 1958 and 1964 (Irfed 1960–61), prevailed. This had important consequences for both the Lebanese economy and the country's political and administrative systems. The lack of investment in the public sector, the state's inability to provide a range of basic services and the virtual absence of investments in the manufacturing sector over time resulted in an economy that was not self-sufficient and a country where financialization prevails. (Dagher 1995). This also had an impact on the construction of a shared national consciousness that exacerbated sectarian divisions and individualism. The state, committed to supporting entrepreneurial freedom, mostly failed to reduce social and economic inequalities (Gaspard 2002; UNDP 2008). This failure proved even more evident in the post-civil war period as the widening gap between rich and poor in Lebanon became more apparent. As Corm (2014) points out, present-day Lebanon is a "two-speed country", where most of the wealth and production activities are concentrated in Beirut and Mount Lebanon and concerns about 5% of the entire population. According to a UNDP report (2007), approximately 8% of Lebanon's population lives in conditions of extreme poverty on 2.4 US dollars/day, and 20.5% of the population falls between the lower and upper poverty lines (4 US dollars/day).¹⁷ Two governorates, Mount Lebanon and the North, witnessed a relative decline in their mean per capita expenditure

¹⁵ In a joint press conference at the beginning of June 2015, after a months-long political vacuum, Aoun and Geagea declared the start of a common path to reach an agreement for the presidency of the republic, which resulted in the election of Michel Aoun in November 2016.

¹⁶ Interview, representative of the Phalange Party, Bikfaya, November 20, 2014.

¹⁷ See UNDP (2008). Despite the lack of more recent data, the situation is expected to worsen, especially after the 2011 influx of Syrian refugees into the country. In December 2015, the Central Administration of Statistics released figures for poverty in Lebanon pertaining to 2011, i.e. prior to the arrival of Syrian refugees. According to this assessment, the rate of poverty in Lebanon was estimated at 27%, with the rate in Beirut and Mount Lebanon being the lowest, and the highest rates recorded in the Bekaa and the North.

(compared with the overall average) from 1997 to 2004–05. This is in line with the large concentration of Maronites in the Mount Lebanon region.¹⁸

These processes of pauperisation have had a major impact on the communities, their leadership and the ways in which they interact with institutions, the political system, their own base and other communities (Baumann 2012). Rafiq Hariri's rise to power and his reconstruction policy, informed by a neo-liberal agenda, had an adverse impact on equality in the country (Baumann 2017). The worsening economic situation was accompanied, in Hariri's politics, by the repression of social dissent. This strategy reached its peak with the suppression of incipient protest movements and the defeat of the Lebanese trade unions, which Hariri and his entourage skilfully co-opted and silenced (Salloukh 2015, 70–87). This policy increased control over the entire society and exacerbated sectarian tensions and social inequalities instead of dampening them (Fawaz 2009).

However, such tensions were kept, at least prior to Hariri's assassination, under the critical threshold so as to maintain a situation of "neither war nor peace" for the benefit of both foreign and domestic businessmen and investors (Khattab 2015). With the exception of Hariri and his family (Vloeberghs 2016), the richer and more active strata of the Maronite community benefitted the most from this situation. Although the Maronites with the Taif Agreement were affected by political resizing, their elites still had bargaining power within Lebanese society thanks to their economic power.¹⁹ Marginalisation did not prevent these elites from promoting an aggressive policy towards the political and social forces that could somehow undermine their economic privileges. For instance, the Maronite elites played a leading role in co-opting the Lebanese trade unions and contributing to their disintegration (Salloukh 2015, 70–87).

Although the elites have tried to keep their power intact, the community's base has become impoverished and has begun challenging the rhetoric that Maronite leaders continued to promote – especially after Taif, in liminal in-between border spaces where counter-hegemonic discourses emerged.

Exploring counter-hegemonic discourses in Maronite liminal in-between spaces

One of the most interesting counter-hegemonic discourses to forcefully question the political-religious nexus as a source of oppression of and control over the community is the reaction to the last aspect we examined, namely the gradual impoverishment of a large part of the Maronite community. This point is interesting because, over the years, and especially since the end of the civil war, not only

¹⁸ It is interesting to note how, for example, according to the Arab Barometer surveys, Lebanon's economic situation is one of the population's primary concerns. Arab Barometer (2012).

¹⁹ Interview, Maronite religious leader, Jbeil, November 19, 2014; interview, representative of the Progressive Socialist Party, Beirut, 22 November 2014.

the Maronite political elites but also the religious ones have been accused for the progressive deterioration of the living conditions of the community (McCallum 2012). The uproar from members of the community over a clergy that does not care about the interests of its own community has grown louder and louder. As most interviewees pointed out, while the patriarch's statements are above all interested in 'high politics', they rarely focus on the living conditions of a part of the Maronite community that, since 1989, has had to deal with greater and greater impoverishment.²⁰ The feeling of frustration and impotence is mixed with complaints against the religious elites: "The continuous interference of the patriarch in political life doesn't help us but, on the contrary, increases the level of marginalisation and weakening."²¹ Pockets of poverty and marginality in Maronite-majority areas are no longer a secret, although this phenomenon is often denied and/or concealed in order to maintain the narrative of social cohesion and "the richest community".

Since the civil war, there have been various attempts at renewing the Maronite Church and calls for Christian unity in Lebanon (A New Hope for Lebanon 1997), but these efforts have not successfully converged into a commitment to improving the living conditions of members of their community or those on the lower rungs of the clerical structure. This attitude has created a strong sense of alienation, particularly among the priests of small villages who have seen their living conditions and those of their communities worsen.²² The patriarch and Church leaders are viewed as increasingly removed from the community and its needs. As reported by one of the interviewees, a priest from a small village in Mount Lebanon who is married with children,²³ "the Maronite Church doesn't even help its own children. There are no scholarships for the children of the priests, who are forced to go to public institutions, where the chances of receiving a good education are lower. If the religious elites were thinking more about their children by providing services like the Shiites do, things would be better." The sense of resentment towards the religious leaders of the community goes hand in hand with the fact that they are considered inadequate compared with the religious leaders of other communities. The most widely used reference is the Shiite community, which is able to provide adequate community welfare services to its members and, more generally, shows that they have compassion for the fate of those in their community.

In a situation generally characterised by a decline in resources and increasing competition for them, as well as worsening economic conditions, community belonging and the possibility of turning to

²⁰ Interviews, Ghebele village and surroundings, 2014–2016.

²¹ Interviews, ML representatives, Beirut, 3 June 2016.

²² Interviews with priests and monks in Ghebele and surroundings 2014–2016.

²³ Even if the Maronite Church is subject to the Church of Rome, it has considerable autonomy not only through the religious tribunals governing the life of community members but also with regard to doctrinal issues, such as the possibility for Maronite priests to marry and have children.

their community have become crucial.²⁴ According to World Bank data, even though Lebanon's real GDP growth in 2016 accelerated slightly to reach an estimated 1.8%, compared with 1.3% in 2015, this slight improvement was driven by development in the real estate sector thanks to a small group of investors. The Syrian crisis has worsened the incidence of poverty among the Lebanese and widened income inequality. In particular, it is estimated that as a result of the Syrian crisis, some 200,000 additional Lebanese have been pushed into poverty, adding to the previous figure of 1 million. An additional 250,000 to 300,000 Lebanese citizens are estimated to have become unemployed, most of them unskilled youth.²⁵ From this point of view, it is interesting to note how the marginalisation of the Maronite community plays a key role in changing the perspective of their members. If the community is no longer able to guarantee its members a certain level of economic security and a range of political 'privileges', then, according to community members, it has failed to reach its primary goal. This paradox appears to be particularly relevant, and from the interviews, a double binary emerges: on the one hand, there are those who ask for more community; on the other hand, there are those who want less control and see overcoming the role of the community (and, by extension, of the community system) as the only way to break down the community system, which "has become more and more a cage that limits the actions of individuals".²⁶ At the same time, breaking this system is difficult if, as many of the priests said, the most enterprising actions are paid dearly: The most innovative priests, who also propose community-based activities in various fields (women, young people, unemployed etc.), are moved from one place to another – often in a very small community, where "we can't do too much harm".

The patriarch's role, as discussed above, appears to be a particularly sensitive topic. Many interviewees stated that "religious leaders, and especially the patriarch, do not think of their people but are only interested in their political games and their own interests".²⁷ Crucial issues, such as the sale of land to non-Lebanese, as well as inter-religious sales, an irreversible phenomenon that could alter the very nature of Lebanon, are unable to break into the political agenda because they are perceived as Maronite 'problems' and are difficult to introduce into the political debate.²⁸ In the view of one interviewee, "the defence of the unity of Lebanon also involves the defence of Christians. Christians today do not have the means to cope with the double pressure, demographic and economic, and then they sell their land".²⁹ The religious authorities are opposed for being too involved in

²⁴ Interviews and participant observation conducted in Kesweraan between 2014 and 2016.

²⁵ World Bank (2017).

²⁶ Interviews with a doctor and an entrepreneur, Ghebele, 23 May 2016.

²⁷ Interviews 2014–2016.

²⁸ See the minutes of the conference about the preservation of Maronite lands on the ML website (<http://goo.gl/wHM4R9>, accessed 1 October 2017).

²⁹ Interview, Maronite religious leader, Ghebele, 1 June 2015.

political affairs, for being uninterested in their members and for not investing time in a spiritual and doctrinal renewal ordinary Maronites feel is necessary. As a member of the community states: “the Maronite community is obsolete; it is now an empty container, especially from a religious point of view. Religious courts are rigid and are not adapting to social changes. So many Maronites abandon their community only to divorce ... and unofficially remain Maronites only for appearances, continuing to attend Sunday Mass. Before the civil war, we were proud to be Maronites, to represent a recognised and admired elite inside and outside Lebanon.” The necessity of having a unified Lebanese civil code instead of religious codes is a very sensitive point, as some of the interviews point out when they speak of their engagement in civic struggles to bring about civil marriage, as well as their commitment to several civic campaigns and protest movements that have shaken Lebanon since the civil war era (Abi Yaghi and Catusse, 2011).³⁰ This element contributes to stretching the margins of the Maronite community by creating more and more liminal spaces where dissent coagulates.

The foundational principles and the ethical values of the community are also strongly questioned: “What sense of belonging are we talking about? What does it mean to be Maronite today? Why does this system prevent us from marrying whom we want, which places physical, mental and symbolic barriers and forces us to ask for favours to get a job, to have a permit to build, open a business etc.?” And furthermore: “I believe that the Maronites have failed because, contrary to what they did in the past, today they no longer have a project, they no longer have a precise project. There is a lack of planning, and Maronites are no longer projecting inside but outside the country.”³¹ While the worsening of individuals’ living conditions endangers the sense of communitarian belonging, there are also acts of the Maronite Church that contribute to this questioning. Some respondents repeatedly emphasised that Maronite spirituality has now been lost in the spheres of power: monks implicated in prostitution scandals, bishops who build immense palaces for themselves and their families, an increasingly spiritual façade where ostentatious religious symbols prevail over crucial Christians values.³²

Thus, being Maronite today does not appear to provide any advantage to its adherents. This is a crucial element, and even though the Maronites are generally identified as the community with more resources, those at the base of the pyramid, who see their living conditions worsening day by day, are

³⁰ Interviews 2014-2016.

³¹ A political leader I interviewed (who asked to remain anonymous) told me that the only thing he is doing for the future of his children is to secure them a passport, maybe Canadian, to give them the chance to go outside Lebanon.

³² One of the cases often referred to by the interviewees is the almost obsessive care that Maronites take when preparing religious ceremonies such as weddings, baptisms and communions; such events are not significant moments of sharing among the community but rather ostentatious displays of belonging, a manifestation of their presence, compared with other communities. Interview with a religious woman, Ghebele, 21 March 2016.

deprived of both collective and individual tools of protest. At the same time, the Maronites seem not to have the power to make demands as individuals; they have not had to refine their repertoires of contention because what they needed was somehow provided for by the community. As an interviewee put it: “the political and religious Maronite elites have a problem of dialogue among themselves. Crucial issues, such as members’ disinterest in the community, their constant impoverishment and the future of the community, are not being discussed or debated.” And yet, “I witnessed the Maronite Synod 10 years ago. I was shocked at how the discussion was conducted. The agenda was shared after the participants had prepared their questions; they had to prepare a space for an open discussion. The discussions were self-referential and took place in a protected context, with no transparency.”

Conclusion

This paper has explored the process that has led to the creation of liminal in-between border spaces inside the Maronite community in Lebanon. We have argued that the marginalisation process that has affected the community after the civil war has strongly contributed to the creation of these liminal spaces. Assuming that Lebanese communities are spaces where mechanisms of control over their members radiate from the centre (political and religious elites) to the periphery (community members), through the transformative concept of liminality, we were able to seize on discourses of dissent that could potentially be counter-hegemonic.

Over many years, the Maronite elites’ (political and religious) efforts to maintain the *status quo* has concealed the true living conditions of a large part of their community and allowed them to spread the double narrative of members’ cohesion and prosperity. It also strengthened the techniques of control within the community and silenced voices of dissent by denying the dissatisfaction of large swathes of Maronites, not only with the progressively deteriorating socio-economic conditions but also with the loosening of the community’s constitutive moral constraints and values. In some respects, the process of marginalisation, as a disruptive event, has had the unexpected consequence of helping the marginalised community’s members to call into question the co-option and control practices of the elites by creating spaces of discussion beyond the elites’ control, where new discourses (and sometimes practices) emerge. In these in-between spaces, whether real, mental or symbolic, issues like the community’s resizing and the political and religious leaders’ inability or unwillingness to innovate, have stimulated the emergence of a new conscience. This new awareness offers insights into the processes of transformation of a crucial Lebanese community, although the elites continue to depict it as the country’s richest and more socially cohesive one – a monolithic bloc that perpetuates itself over time.

The marginalisation of the Maronites is creating a profound political and religious split between the elites and the base, between the core and the margins, and highlighting the elites growing disinterest in the more disadvantaged strata of the population. This, in the long run, could have an impact not only in the Maronite community but also on the confessional system itself, questioning communities' identities and appurtenance.

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