

Lebanon against the Backdrop of the 2011  
Arab Uprisings: Which Revolution in Sight?

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# Lebanon against the Backdrop of the 2011 Arab Uprisings: Which Revolution in Sight?

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## Abstract

Lebanon, one of the most highly politicized and divided societies in the Middle East, has watched the 2011 Arab Uprising nervously. Yet its own intricate legacy cross-communal compromise and the porous nature of its society have left it relatively unscathed. However, this could easily change.

**KEYWORDS:** Lebanon, Arab Uprising, sectarianism, Intifada

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Why has the 2011 Arab Spring euphoria not spread to Beirut? What makes Lebanon's political configuration distinctive?

Answering these questions requires one to break away from the urge to analyze the *replicability* of the revolutionary moment throughout the Middle East but rather to emphasize local factors. Social science in general and democratization studies in the Middle East have lately come under scrutiny<sup>1</sup> in this regard for two overarching reasons.

First, the unexpected revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt have disconfirmed widespread criteria elaborated by social scientists to predict the likeliness of a revolution. The suddenness of the uprisings has shown that while "interpreting a revolution as it unfolds" might be possible, explaining where and when it will take place is impossible.<sup>2</sup>

Second, research on political systems in the Middle East has focused on Middle Eastern exceptionalism and resistance to democracy, disregarding the region's propensity for democratic change. Generally speaking, this literature has argued that a series of international and domestic factors make the region less receptive to democracy; authoritarian regimes display trends of stability and resilience; and semi-autocratic systems such as Egypt that have carried out liberalization attempts to placate discontent have better odds of survival.

The explanatory paradigms that have so far dictated understanding of the Middle East are being currently revisited, and academia is invited to pose "self-critical" questions regarding its ability to predict events and consequently inform policy-making.<sup>3</sup> Current debates point out the necessity for new paradigms of political change in the Arab world. This requires refocusing on the convergence of variables such as socio-economic discontent with the rise of new social movements, variables dismissed by social scientists in Middle Eastern studies as not sufficiently valid to stir democratization from below. Abstaining from making judgments and interpreting instead the uprisings as they take place might help us fill in hindsight major gaps in our understanding of the Arab world.

Lebanon has been generally regarded as a classical case of state disintegration,<sup>4</sup> but also as an example of a classical power-sharing democracy.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Oliver Schlumberger, "Kritik an Politikwissenschaft Nahost-Experten, echte und andere," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, <http://www.faz.net/s/RubC3FFBF288EDC421F93E22EFA74003C4D/Doc~EB801521038C44E70A062DA4DCE3CCA12~ATpl~Ecommon~Scontent.html>, retrieved on April 5th 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Cihan Tugal, "The Protests in Egypt: First Takes," The Berkeley Sociology Colloquium Series, Spring 2011, April 4, 2011.

<sup>3</sup> See for instance Nathalie Tocci and Jean-Pierre Cassarino, "Rethinking the EU's Mediterranean Policies Post-9/11," *IAI Working Papers* 11/06-March 2011, 1; Fawwaz Trabulsi, "The Democratic Changes in the Region in Light of the Arab Intifadat," Panel Discussion, Lebanese American University, March 28, 2011.

<sup>4</sup> David Gordon, *Lebanon: The Fragmented Nation* (London: Croom Helm, 1980).

While some analysts refer to the small Arab Republic as an artificial assemblage of communities, others praise its pluralism and its ability to withstand shocks in a largely unstable region on the other.

To study such an example of Middle Eastern “dissonant politics”<sup>6</sup> scholars usually situate Lebanon in the literature on conflict regulation methods in divided societies. A theoretical and empirical democratic typology which has inspired academics in their analyses of pre-war and post-war Lebanon is the consociational or power-sharing democracy model. This democratic typology is defined as an “accommodative” model of governance<sup>7</sup> which foresees the division of political power among constituent ethnic or religious groups in multi-national or multi-communal states.<sup>8</sup> Based primarily on political leaders’ coalescence and determination to overcome divisive issues, power-sharing consists in establishing inclusive multipolar coalitions representing different contending blocs, and instilling institutional mechanisms guaranteeing proportionality and veto power for the minorities.<sup>9</sup> Generally perceived by consociational theorists as a means to expand democratic prospects in a fragmented political culture, this model has been attacked for entrenching divisions and heightening instability.

Lebanon’s power-sharing formula is based on an informal national pact (*Al Mithaq el Watani*) negotiated in 1943 by Lebanese decision-makers. Although the pact has been influenced by practices acquired from the colonial Ottoman and French heritage, it is also to be interpreted as the materialization of Lebanese groups’ willingness to embark on a common state-building project. Hinging on the principle of inter-confessional coexistence, the unwritten pact foresees political pluralism as the vehicle to manage divisions and reconcile the contrasting loyalties that separate Lebanon’s multiple religious denominations.<sup>10</sup> Thus, Christians and Muslims were called to forsake external loyalties, be they Western or pro-Greater Syria, for the sake of a Lebanese state.

The unwritten covenant envisaged the creation of a political system whose description largely approximates the power-sharing model. Thus, a grand

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<sup>5</sup>Gerhard Lehbruch, “A Non-competitive Pattern of Conflict Management in Liberal Democracies: The Case of Switzerland, Austria and Lebanon,” in *Consociational Democracy: Political Accommodation in Segmented Societies* edited by Kenneth McRae, 90-97 (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974).

<sup>6</sup> Daniel Brumberg, “Islamists and the Politics of Consensus,” *Journal of Democracy* 13 (2002):109-115, 112.

<sup>7</sup> Milton Esman, *An Introduction to Ethnic Conflict* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004), 178.

<sup>8</sup> See Matthis Bogaards, “Democracy and Power-Sharing in Multinational States: Thematic Introduction,” in *International Journal on Multicultural Societies* 8 (2006), pp.119-26.

<sup>9</sup> Arend Lijphart, *Democracy in Plural Societies: A Comparative Exploration* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977)

<sup>10</sup> Muslims in Lebanon include Sunni, Shiite and Druze communities. Christians are Maronites, Greek Catholics, Greek Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox and Armenian Catholics, and Protestants etc.

coalition government between a Maronite president, a Sunni prime minister and a Shiite speaker of the chamber was devised. A ratio of six Christian deputies to five Muslim deputies was adopted in the legislature. Various religious groups were proportionally represented in the Council of Ministers, and each religious community established its own educational institutions and courts.

The formula, which rested on communal checks and balances, allowed Lebanon to deviate from the trajectory of authoritarianism, a trajectory which had prevailed for decades as the 'norm' in Arab countries. In addition to paving the way for a functioning albeit deficient democracy in a region known for being a 'fortress' for autocracies, it conferred to the pre-war Lebanese pluralistic model a prescriptive value to be emulated by divided societies.<sup>11</sup> While neighboring authoritarian regimes such as Syria or Iraq at the time camouflaged the problem of ethno-religious minorities by consolidating a suppressive political system, Lebanon upheld, for better or worse, its pluralism.

Although the Lebanese republic enjoyed relative stability for about 30 years, the power-sharing formula tragically collapsed in 1975 with war. The breakdown was caused by deeply interwoven domestic and exogenous factors. Regional upheavals relating to the Arab-Israeli conflict in the 1970s caused internal rifts concerning Lebanon's policy track vis-à-vis the Palestinian issue.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, the confessional nature of the political system, which rigidifies divisions and heightens the conflict potentiality of sectarian divides, dealt the final blow by reinforcing the impact of external conflicts within Lebanon.<sup>13</sup>

In 1989, the Ta'if Pact, brokered by regional and international powers, put an end to a fifteen-year war. The new pact safeguarded Lebanon's legacy of political pluralism while introducing reforms. In the legislature, the former superiority of six to five between Christians and Muslims was replaced by parity. The Maronite president's prerogatives were downsized, and the council of ministers acquired more privileges. The Ta'if agreement stipulated the stationing of Syrian troops for a two-year period in Lebanon with a view to helping the Lebanese state to re-establish its authority. After the two-year period, the troops were supposed to withdraw.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Obviously, this prescriptive value hinging on the constructiveness of pluralism in pre-war Lebanon has lost ground as Lebanon's post-war peace process has been derailed.

<sup>12</sup> Theodor Hanf, *Coexistence in Wartime Lebanon: Decline of a State and Rise of a Nation* (London: Center for Lebanese Studies in association with I.B. Tauris & Co, 1993).

<sup>13</sup> Michael Hudson, "The Lebanese Crisis: The Limits of Consociational Democracy", *Journal of Palestine Studies* 5 (1976): 109-122.

<sup>14</sup> The rationale for Syria's military and political predominance in Lebanon has domestic and international underpinnings. In the internal scene, the Ta'if states that the Syrian troops shall help the Lebanese state re-establish its authority on Lebanese territory. Lebanese decision-makers have moreover perpetuated the belief that after a draining war, the Lebanese state is too weak to enforce stability and security. Furthermore, Syria received US approval to consolidate its hegemonic role

As the two year-period elapsed, Syria's temporary guardianship became similar to a 'stranglehold.' Not only did the Syrian troops remain stationed in Lebanon until 2005, but Syria became the major determining voice in Lebanese politics. Lebanese decision-makers, who acquiesced to the Syrian-sponsored order, easily gained political office and consolidated their political influence. In sum, Lebanon's post-Ta'if order was shaped by a security-oriented Syrian-Lebanese model of governance rather than by the post-conflict settlement itself. It deviated in many ways from the initial power-sharing path that was foreseen by the 1943 pact of coexistence.<sup>15</sup>

By the end of 2004, with the anti-constitutional yet Syrian-backed decision to extend Lebanese President Emile Lahoud's mandate, a conflict emerged pitting supporters of the pro-Syrian order against those who called for the end of Syria's hegemony in Lebanon. In spring 2005, amid extreme political polarization regarding Syria's role in Lebanon, and in the wake of premier Rafik Hariri's slaying in Beirut, the so-called transcommunal 'Democratic Uprising' or Beirut Spring was followed by the Syrian troops' pullout in April, under heavy international pressure. Tens of thousands of protesters called for about two months for the termination of the post-war Syrian era in Lebanon and for dismantling the Syrian-Lebanese 'security regime.' In the wake of the Intifada, the 2005 and 2009 parliamentary elections led to a parliament dominated by the anti-Syrian majority, commonly depicted as the March 14 Coalition.<sup>16</sup>

According to some observers, the electoral victory of the anti-Syrian multi-confessional coalition inaugurated a political revival in Lebanon. Optimistic analyses in the international and national media referred to the dawn of a renewed Lebanese pact of power-sharing galvanized by the Beirut Spring fever and reminiscent of 1943. Still, no sooner did the euphoria of the Independence Intifada wane than the deep rooted divisions resurfaced, this time even stronger.

Since the withdrawal of Syrian troops, two antagonistic nation-building projects for a post-Syrian Lebanon pulled Lebanon in two opposite directions. The anti-Syrian or March 14 Alliance promoted the vision of Lebanese polity freed from Syria's and Hezbollah's grip. It argues that Hezbollah's arsenal

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in Lebanon after it had joined the anti-Iraqi Coalition in the 1990-1991 Gulf War.

<sup>15</sup> See Hussein Dakroub, "Can Lebanon Avoid another Civil War?", *The Daily Star*, April 13, 2011, <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Local-News/Apr/13/Can-Lebanon-avoid-another-Civil-War.ashx#axzz1JRM0oCAq>, retrieved on April 14, 2011. In the article, Lebanon's current president, Michel Sleiman, is quoted as arguing that the Ta'if settlement has so far not been applied.

<sup>16</sup>The anti-Syrian Coalition is commonly called the March 14 Alliance, because it staged on March 14 in 2005 one of the biggest demonstrations in Lebanon's history grouping some 1 million Lebanese. This anti-Syrian demonstration was a reaction to a demonstration staged by the pro-Syrian forces on March 8.

exposes Lebanon to polarization and lures external interference. It moreover upholds the investigations carried out by the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL) investigating Hariri's slaying despite the prevailing speculation that indictments would involve Hezbollah officials.

By contrast, the March 8 Alliance, led by the Shiite party Hezbollah and commonly depicted as a pro-Syrian loyalist alliance, is also a multi-sectarian constellation. But it has opposite points of view. Disapproving of pro-Western interferences, it perceives Hezbollah's demilitarization as unthinkable in light of the protracted Arab-Israeli conflict. The Alliance opposes the investigations carried out by the Tribunal and perceives them as an externally-sponsored attempt to ignite enmities in the divided republic and to weaken the Party of God.

It is worth mentioning that these antagonistic alliances are not as coherent as they seem to be. Since 2005, the March 14 Coalition has lost ground because of internal rifts.<sup>17</sup> Alignments in the March 8 Coalition, namely the alliance between Hezbollah and the Maronite leader Michel Aoun, are depicted as *a marriage of convenience*. Controversy also hovers over the extent to which these alliances reflect the plurality of positions and discourses characterizing Lebanese communities. Lebanon's public spheres today include several spheres of contestation, which do not necessarily align with these monolithic projects.<sup>18</sup> Tensions between the two coalitions have dramatically escalated since last fall, and in the last months, Hezbollah has made steady pressure on the government to end its support for the STL.

As the Tunisian uprising gained momentum in January, divergences in Beirut culminated into the collapse of the March 14 Coalition-led government as Hezbollah and its allies withdrew their ministers. In spite of various externally-brokered mediations, the lingering divide between the two alliances has so far prevented the formation of a unity government. Even though a government might see the light in the coming weeks, divisions will cast a pall on its representativeness. Lebanon's current balance of power is yet far from being determinative and is constantly undergoing shifts and realignments.

In this context of fragmentation, how does Lebanon fit into the picture of an Arab Spring and how come that Lebanon, depicted for many decades as the

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<sup>17</sup> One of the 14 March Coalition's founding actors, Walid Jumblatt, has recently aligned himself with the pro-Syrian Alliance.

<sup>18</sup> References to bipolar divides are recurrent in the media and in daily discourses. These cleavages are portrayed as an expression of a regional and international struggle between the pro-Sunni blocs versus the 'Shiite Crescent' or between pro-Western versus pro-Iranian blocs. According to journalistic analyses, the outcomes of revolts or power-sharing deliberations in countries such as Bahrain or Lebanon will determine whether the Middle Eastern balance of power will tilt in favor of Shiite or Sunni groupings. It is important to draw however attention to the fact that these references simplify a far more complex landscape grouping actors with different leanings and orientations.

only Arab democracy<sup>19</sup> is – ironically enough – pictured today “as the last conservative regime in the region”<sup>20</sup> as its sectarian foundations seem unshakable? To answer this question, a closer look at Lebanon’s political dynamics and dilemmas is needed. The Lebanese had ‘an occasion for a revolution’ or a favorable time to bring about substantial change in 2005, as the international and domestic climate was receptive to reform. Many Lebanese politicians have been proud to present the Arab uprisings currently taking place as an extension of Lebanon’s 2005 Intifada. Irrespective of whether the Beirut Uprising has inspired the Arab Street, the 2005 Intifada failed from turning into a revolution, and is in many ways dissimilar from the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings. Retrospectively, the uprising resembles more an aborted or unfulfilled project.<sup>21</sup> Why?

Lebanon’s transition in 2005 has proven that under favorable circumstances, the system can become more democratic and power-sharing elements can be refined, yet as soon as external tensions and internal divisiveness overburden the system, political gains are quickly lost. Notwithstanding cross-cutting affiliations fostered by the uprising, transcommunal linkages were not sufficiently strong as to bring about structural institutional changes or to alter the ways political power is transmitted in Lebanon. A closer look at the mechanisms that triggered the uprising allows us to infer that the demonstrations and the convergence of different political aspirations back then were largely set in motion by international and particularly US pressure. In contrast, in the Egyptian and Tunisian cases, the absence of international interference, at least in the early stages, helps us evaluate the extent to which popular mobilization mirrors a democratization attempt from below.

More importantly, the 2005 uprising could not wipe out the deep seated divergences between the anti-Syrian and the pro-Syrian coalitions in Lebanon which initially galvanized it. As a result of political squabbling, sectarianism has emerged as Lebanese citizens’ last resort to a semblance of a state in the absence of a cohesive leadership. The current political divergences which have heightened sectarian divides do not seem circumstantial or likely to wither soon. In fact, they are anchored in a longstanding and unresolved struggle regarding Lebanon’s identity, foreign politics, and policy track in the Middle East. Divisiveness over the role and finality of Hezbollah’s arsenal is indicative of core struggles evocative of Beirut’s past wars and portending its future conflicts: Should Lebanon continue to be the middle ground in the Arab-Israeli conflict or should

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<sup>19</sup> See Larry Diamond, “Why are there no Arab democracies?” *Journal of Democracy* 21 (2010): 93-104, 93.

<sup>20</sup> Jamil Mouawad, “Lebanon: The Last Conservative Regime in the Region”, *Opendemocracy.net*, March 5 2011, <http://www.opendemocracy.net/jamil-mouawad/lebanon-last-conservative-regime-in-region>, retrieved on April 11, 2011.

<sup>21</sup> See Samir Kassir, *Liban, le rêve inachevé*, (Paris: Actes Sud), 2006.



Lebanon follow a policy of non-involvement so as not to exacerbate sectarian divisions? What are Lebanon's obligations as an Arab state "in belonging and identity,"<sup>22</sup> and which actors on Lebanese territory are to spell them out? How long are the Lebanese expected to live in a resistance mode in the framework of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict? Lebanese leaders and communities are deeply divided over these issues. This division finds its most intense expression in the controversy as to whether Lebanon is a country with an Arab face or an Arab country. This controversy has been settled on paper yet remains unsettled in discursive, public and political spheres.<sup>23</sup>

Against this background of polarization, debating the likeliness of the domino effect to unfold in Lebanon appears less realistic than weighing the prospects for crisis management. Lebanon's divisions and encroachment in deep rooted disputes hinder at least currently, a spontaneous popular mobilization around a common goal. Of particular importance to public and governmental debates remains the dilemma of pursuing justice and finding the perpetrators of Hariri's murder or sacrificing justice at the altar of stability.

A general atmosphere of apprehension prevails as to whether inter-sectarian confrontations might ensue or whether Hezbollah would radicalize. Will the political elites unite to find an Arab-brokered 'face-saving formula' or is confrontation between the two blocs looming large?

Despite the fact that the specificity Lebanon's dilemmas and the distinctiveness of its political pluralism set it aside from the patterns of uprisings engulfing the region, it is unquestionable that Lebanon is already entangled in the revolutionary whirlwind. As a result of the porous nature of the Lebanese state,<sup>24</sup> the outcomes and realignments shaped along or stemming from the revolutions will have a bearing on Lebanon's political order.

Two overarching discourses, somewhat mutually antagonistic, regarding the Arab uprisings have gained ground in Beirut. The uprisings are perceived by sections of the Lebanese population as an opportune time to press for political reform. In fact, the Tunisian and Egyptian revolts empowered protesters to take to the streets calling for deconfessionalization. Anti-sectarian protests in Sidon,

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<sup>22</sup>The Ta'if Agreement, General principles, Section B.

<http://www.albab.com/arab/docs/lebanon/taif.htm>, retrieved on April 14, 2011.

<sup>23</sup>Whereas the 1943 Pact states that Lebanon is a country with an Arab face, the Ta'if agreement settles the debate by affirming that Lebanon is an Arab state "in belonging and identity". Although this debate has been concluded on paper, no serious national dialogue has spelled out what Lebanon's regional duties as an Arab state in "belonging and identity" are, and whether involvement in regional conflicts detracts from the Lebanese state's duties towards preserving internal coexistence.

<sup>24</sup> Georges Corm, "Le Liban est revenu au statut d'Etat tampon", *La Revue du Liban* n° 4027, November 2005 accessible at

<http://www.georgescorm.com/personal/download.php?file=121105.pdf>.

Tripoli and Beirut have called for ‘toppling the sectarian regime’ and for the demise of Lebanon’s communal lords, pictured as the source of Lebanon’s ills, nepotism, and corruption. Still these protests remain fragmented and have not mobilized large sections of the population.

It is debatable though the extent to which this anti-sectarian wave is to be solely attributed to the uprisings. Even prior to the Arab revolts, anti-sectarian ‘counterpublics’ that do not represent the two hegemonic 14 or 8 March Coalitions have been pressing for a *secular society* based on meritocracy. Social actors shaping these anti-sectarian spheres include civil society activists, intellectuals, and artists who have been calling in their writings or artistic works for a reinvented political consciousness inscribed into civic engagement. Starting reforms would be, according to them, civil marriage and a new electoral law.

A countervailing discourse is one of disenchantment. Many Lebanese who participated in the Intifada back then, feel that their efforts had been belittled, sapped, or have been in vain. This is due to the conviction that Lebanon’s political system is change resistant and blocks through sectarian deal making the accession of young and new elites to the political process.

Disenchantment is coupled with caution vis-à-vis Arab uprisings and their outcomes which remain fraught with uncertainty. Hence, while the Egyptian and Tunisians uprisings have been so far “success stories,” protracted conflicts in Libya, Yemen, Syria and Bahrain cast doubt on how swift political revolutions *à la tunisienne* can take place. Further, some pro-Syrian groupings in Lebanon are affected by the conservative political rhetoric promoted by some Arab leaders to curb the enthusiasm provoked by these protests. This discouraging political rhetoric highlights the transitory character of these uprisings. A typical example of this rhetoric is Bashar Al Assad’s speech on March 30th, which emphasized the contrived element in the so-called Arab Spring and the fact that reform was not a seasonal issue.<sup>25</sup>

Notwithstanding the polemical stances that Arab uprisings have stirred in Lebanon, the revolts are expected to tilt Lebanon’s balance of power in two contradictory ways: realignments crafted by post-revolutionary order will empower certain domestic factions and disempower others (which now cannot be predicted perfectly), yet the unprecedented rise of the democratic discourse in the Arab world will render Lebanon’s democratic legacy even more sacred. The prominence and influence of the March 8 and March 14 Coalitions are expected to be reshaped by the post-revolutionary order. As noted before, power-sharing and coalition-building in Lebanon are not solely the result of domestically-bred

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<sup>25</sup> Robert Fisk, “Assad: The Arab Spring stops here: While Syria's protesters demand freedom, President has stark message for his people,” *The Independent*, March 31, 2011, <http://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/commentators/fisk/robert-fisk-assad-the-arab-spring-stops-here-2257883.html>, retrieved on April 2, 2011.

alliances but are contingent on regional and international linkages. The shaken legacies of autocratic leaders as well as religious and ethno-political realignments in some countries such as Bahrain<sup>26</sup> and Syria<sup>27</sup> signal an era of volatility for Lebanon's porous democracy.

Yet, although some groupings in Lebanon might acquire some prominence more than others, the empowerment of the Arab Street will make it hard for any political bloc to claim preponderance in Lebanon. Also, the disturbance of the authoritarian status quo that has reigned for decades in the Arab world will make it difficult for any party in Lebanon to radicalize its position without embarking on a full-blown confrontation. More importantly, it is expected that, associational life – once the STL controversy abates in Lebanon – gains impetus and that emerging social actors, so far overshadowed by sectarian politics, make an entry or *revendicate* their space after the failed 2005 Spring. Yet, this does not mean that Lebanese are condemned to sectarianism or that they are passive subjects awaiting external alignments – namely the regional war between the Sunni-led blocs and the Shiite Crescent – to engineer their fate. As in Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain, Yemen, and Syria, socio-economic discontent and alienation from the political system are building up in the small republic.

The sectarian power-sharing mode has shown its limitations both in the external and internal spheres. First, in steering Lebanon into an increasingly globalized and polarized international order and by crystallizing confessional divisions into political molds, it not only makes religious cleavages easily ignitable but fallible to external polarities. Also, since the Syrian troops' withdrawal, the system of checks and balances ingrained into Lebanon's power-sharing framework has guaranteed a *low-intensity* conflict management mode, episodically derailed by conflicts of regional nature.<sup>28</sup> Retrospectively, the system has only functioned well as external and internal loads were minimal and provided regional problems did not replicate in Lebanon. In other words,

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<sup>26</sup> In Bahrain, the deepening divide between the ruling Sunni government and the Shiite opposition has degenerated into unrest and violent upheavals.

<sup>27</sup> Syria's leader Bashar el Assad has lately made concessions to the Sunnis and to the Kurds so as to defuse the wave of discontent destabilizing the country. It is argued that should Kurds and Sunnis mobilize against the regime, then the Ba'athist regime is to collapse. See Liam Stack and Katherine Zoepf, "Syria Tries to Placate Sunnis and Kurds," *New York Times*, April 6, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/07/world/middleeast/07syria.html>, retrieved on April 7, 2011.

<sup>28</sup> Lebanon has known two wars of a regional nature since 2006: the Hezbollah-Israeli 2006 War and the 2007 Nahr el Bared confrontations. While one is inclined to argue that the turbulence of the regional environment increases the likeliness of wars, Lebanon's polarized political structure incites the overlapping of regional tensions with internal dividing lines as political elites rarely agree on a common course of action in regional politics.

maintaining the system depends on uncontrollable and unlikely variables, such as a low external pressure or an outstanding elite commitment.<sup>29</sup>

Second, in the internal sphere and in light of the political squabbling that has paralyzed Lebanon's political life since 2006,<sup>30</sup> the rift between the communal *Zuama* and the communities themselves has grown. The sectarian mode of sharing power is believed to disenfranchise some groupings, undermine meritocracy, and favor clientelistic networks and nepotism. It is perceived by the underprivileged as an apparatus for dividing the spoils rather than sharing resources.

Notwithstanding prevailing dissatisfaction with Lebanon's system, seeing Lebanon through the prism of the domino effect in the Arab world prevents us from capturing the main dilemma lurking beneath. A Lebanese revolution implies at this stage the annihilation of the kernel of the sectarian system i.e. deconfessionalization. Still, the stakes involved in de-sectarianizing the system are quite high. As there is currently no agreement on which alternative democratic model would prevail – let alone no nationally-based political parties to lead the change – deconfessionalizing the political system is perceived by many as a step into the abyss.<sup>31</sup> 'Deconfessionalizing the call for deconfessionalization'<sup>32</sup> remains the impending challenge.

Upon pondering what a Lebanese revolution against sectarianism might look like, one is reminded of a longstanding debate as to whether a gradual transformation of social and political processes brings about with time the same results that a revolution induces – albeit without bloodshed. In the Lebanese case, this debate seems worth having. Many scholars and practitioners agree today that a Lebanese revolution with a view to reengineering the political foundations of the republic inscribes itself into an evolutionary process of transformation rather

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<sup>29</sup> See Tamirace Fakhoury, *Power-Sharing and Democracy in Stormy Weather: the Lebanese case*, (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag, 2009).

<sup>30</sup> A para-institutional national dialogue was launched in March 2006 with a view to discussing divisive domestic and foreign policy issues. Still, the dialogue suspended with the breakout of the Hezbollah-Israeli Summer War in July 2006 has not led to any tangible results. The inexistence of arbitrating institutional mechanisms in Lebanon's institutions cast a pall over the effectiveness of its conflict regulation capacity. Leaders may debate contentious issues for months without resorting to deadlock-breaking institutional mechanisms.

<sup>31</sup> Minorities in Lebanon are afraid that deconfessionalizing the system might bring about a governance mode based on the supremacy of one religious group. While these fears are based on mere speculation, they are nonetheless indicative of inter-sectarian distrust (Results of interviews carried out by the author since 2007 with Lebanese nationals and Lebanese living abroad).

<sup>32</sup> Nawaf A. Salam "Deconfessionalizing the Call for Deconfessionalization", *The Lebanese Center for Policy Studies*, <http://www.lcps-lebanon.org/pub/breview/br6/salambr6.html>, retrieved on April 12, 2011.

than as a spontaneous uprising which pits one community against the other.<sup>33</sup> As Weiss states:

If modern Lebanese sectarianism has been made, it can certainly also be unmade. Like the making of Lebanese sectarianism, though, the unmaking would inevitably hinge on complex institutional discursive transformations as well as profound reconceptualizations and reformulations of deeply entrenched systems of law, ideology and culture.<sup>34</sup>

A revolution against sectarianism in Lebanon would entail a change of political culture and institutions. It would presuppose first and foremost a new political consciousness marked by an all-encompassing commitment to deconfessionalization, otherwise any project proposed or imposed by a Lebanese party to desectarianize the system would acquire confessional tones. Policy-oriented research plays an important role in testing how sectarian power-sharing can evolve with time into an integrative mode of governance whereby sectarianism would lose its rationalization.<sup>35</sup>

While disrupting the entrenched sectarian logic into which Lebanese societal structures are deeply enmeshed might require an uprising organized by new social movements against Lebanon's patron-client leadership, desectarianizing the legacy of sectarianism in geographical spaces, political processes and educational institutions is a potentially far-reaching process.

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<sup>33</sup> See Salam, "deconfessionalizing,"; Max Weiss, *In the Shadow of Sectarianism, Law, Shi'ism and the Making of Modern Lebanon*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010).

<sup>34</sup> Weiss, 235-36.

<sup>35</sup> There is scarcity of normative research on how power-sharing models based on confessional markers can evolve into integrative societies. For a definition of the concept of "integrative power-sharing" and its facilitating mechanisms, see Timothy Sisk. "Power-sharing after Civil Wars: Matching Problems to Solutions," in *Contemporary Peace Making: Conflict, Violence and Peace Process* edited by John Darby and Roger MacGinty, 139-150, (UK: Basingstoke, 2003)