The Challenge of Media Fragmentation and Political Sectarianism after the Arab Spring

Imad Salamey
Associate Professor of Political Science
Lebanese American University, Beirut

Muzammil Hussain
University of Washington

The ongoing political upheavals in many Middle Eastern and North African countries, popularly termed "the Arab Spring" represent a major challenge to decades of authoritarian rule in one of the last remaining non-democratic state systems in the world. These upheavals also present a major dilemma to movements and parties lobbying to replace their rapidly collapsing authoritarian regimes with democratic institutions and alliances. Many commentators have expressed concerns about the rise of "Islamism" in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, and in which ways the newly elected Islamist parties will coordinate with their non-religious, perhaps secular, liberal minorities in places like Egypt, Tunisia, and others. Despite the recently successful revolutions initially sparked by small groups of young, tech-savvy, cosmopolitan protesters, the overwhelming success of Islamist candidates to replace the preceding secular authoritarian rulers has alarmed both Western observers and local minorities. Considering that the Arab Spring was initially inspired and powered by the sophisticated use of digital tools and fragmented media spaces in the quick activation and mobilisation of street protests, the intriguing question emerges as to how to factor in the different forms of media use and the impact of the media in the *long-term* process of democratisation, especially in societies with competing ethnic minorities and political sectarianism.

The importance of safeguarding political minorities in newly established democracies has a far-reaching impact on the long-term process of democratisation.

Ethnic and sectarian minority conflicts present a rather different form of political uncertainty, which many newly formed states during the third wave of democratisation were also tasked with addressing. For example, Ted Gurr's "Minorities at Risk" (1993) examined various communal group conflicts around the world with their respective majorities, while Samuel Huntington's "Clash of Civilizations" (1993) thesis foreshadowed global differences in political culture as an important dimension in shaping democratisation. Although their observations were established during the collapse and disintegration of the Soviet Union in the 1990s, these concerns are structurally relevant again as societies in the Arab world are in a similar state of flux, responding to the most popular democratic uprisings in recent memory – something we may cautiously title "democracy's fourth wave." The question of minorities' attitudes towards democratic transition, however, whether viewed anxiously as a coming clash of civilisations, or optimistically, as an end to history, is well pronounced in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.

Since 2011, political minorities in the MENA region have been confronted with dramatic transformations, widely described as the "Arab Spring" by the optimists, "Arab Revolts" by the vigilant, and "Arab Winter" by pessimists. These different perceptions are strongly shaped by group attitudes toward expected political gains or losses. Minorities' fears of retaliation have also been sharpened consequently after a period of authoritarian rulers' manipulation of sectarian rifts for political gain. For example, in 2003 after the collapse of the Iraqi Baath rule due to the US-led invasion, the Iraqi Christians faced a series of targeted attacks. More recently, in the aftermath of the Arab Spring and civil war in Libya, the Tawarek ethnic minority and other pro-Gaddafi tribes have faced assaults and evictions. In Egypt, the sizable minority of

Christian Copts fear persecution amid rising tensions, and mob reprisals, during the nation's current and uncertain economic future. Thus, throughout the countries affected by the Arab Spring, a variety of minority ethnic and sectarian groups stand by anxiously as their nations rebuild institutions and rewrite constitutions, fearing the rise of majoritarian tyranny.

This report examines these issues of ethnic and minority sectarianism vis-à-vis the newly restructured and fragmented media environments that inform Arab publics' political calculations in the long-term process of democratisation. Digital media tools, like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, blogs, and more were demonstrably significant in the short-term mobilising period *during* the protest phase, but how does the diversified ecology of media tools, channels and content factor into the *long-term* period of democratisation and institution building in the Arab region? What are the different understandings of the Arab Spring that are facilitating or alleviating the rise of ethnic sectarianism and political fragmentation? These are important questions to be addressed, but doing so for the region as a whole is beyond reach at this stage. It should be recognised, however, that there are approximately thirty politically active minorities in the Middle East and North Africa (Harff, 1993). These minority groups vary greatly in their level of political power: the Alawis in Syria have successfully accumulated power, while the Shias in Saudi Arabia have not, for example. But transitions in power positions along majority-minority lines can significantly alter groups' senses of national cohesion and, if not appropriately formulated, undermine their ability to form a peaceful coexistence (Salamey and Tabar, 2008).

This report sheds light on whether fears and reservations about majoritarian tyranny exist today in the post-Arab Spring context, among local minorities. We also discuss how these political groups currently imagine different pathways towards building pluralistic polities and societies, and most importantly which aspects of the emerging media system correspond with and help shape these aspects of opinion formation. To do so, of the 20+ countries in the Arab world, we focus on the case of Lebanon. Lebanon has been described as "The House of Many Mansions" (Salibi, 2003). Though no single sectarian group is believed to have an absolute demographic presence, it is largely estimated that the population of four million consists of mainly Sunnis, Shias, and Christians,

each constituting one third of the population (Central Intelligence Agency, 2012). The Muslim community is represented by the Sunni (27%) and Shia (27%) sects, as well as a minority Druze (5.6%) community which traces its roots to Shia Ismaili heritage. The Christian community is represented by a Catholic Maronite (22.2%) sect, and Orthodox (8%) and Catholic (5%) minorities. These proportions are approximated, as no official census has existed since 1932 for various political and sectarian reasons. Regardless, no one single sectarian community has managed to exercise a majoritarian influence in State-society relations. Lebanon is the best testing ground to examine media use and sectarian politics in the region – it has both a cosmopolitan and sophisticated media-savvy population, but also the most diverse and heated discussions regarding sectarian politics, given its long and bloody civil war.

Based on a rare, detailed, and representative public opinion survey of Lebanese sectarian attitude, we assess the extent to which belonging to a sectarian minority group shapes political attitudes and judgments towards the contemporary revolutionary changes in the Middle East and North Africa. By using the Lebanese case as a starting-point, we engage with a host of key questions: How do different sectarian groups perceive the impact of the "Arab Spring" and how do they forecast the political change that is yet to come? How does their newfound access to a fragmented media ecology, including social networking platforms, satellite cable television, as well as existing media outlets, influence these political calculations? Addressing these questions is important for understanding the sectarian anxiety underlying the long-term democratisation and institution building that is currently playing out in several Arab democracies, including Tunisia and Egypt. Lebanese public opinion, with its diverse sectarian and institutional constituency, can forecast minority-angled answers to such questions during times of duress, transition, and transformation.

Diversified Media Diets and Opinion Polarisation

Considering that most media outlets in Lebanon, in particular, and in the region more generally, are sectarian or politically sponsored, our survey measured

TABLE 1	Confessional Representation in Parliament (2005)		
Religion	Confession	Registered Voters	%
Christians	Maronites	667,556	22.19
	Greek Orthodox	236,402	7.86
	Greek Catholic	156,521	5.20
	Armenian Orthodox	90,675	3.01
	Armenian Catholic	20,217	0.67
	Protestant	17,409	0.58
Christian Minorities		47,018	1.56
Total Christians		**1,235,798**	**41.08**
Muslims	Sunni	795,233	26.44
	Shia	783,903	26.06
	Druze	169,293	5.63
	Alawite	23,696	0.79
	Ismaelite	0	0.00
Total Muslims		**1,772,125**	**58.92**
Total		**3,007,923**	**100.00**

Source: Lebanese Ministry of Interior and Municipalities.

the media's role in the consolidation of sectarian public attitudes. To assess the potential impact of media use and attention to news coverage, our question batteries measured: television use, newspaper use, internet use, and radio use as the most important source of media content. Because television news is a significant source of political information in Lebanon, and is often divided by partisan and sectarian outlets, we also asked respondents if they use the most-watched news outlets, including: Al-Jazeera, Al-Arabia, Al-Manar, Future TV, LBC, MTV, NBN, NTV, and OTV. Lastly, because of the widespread diffusion of digital media and its important role during protest periods, we created a separate "digital media index," which included uses of: Facebook, Twitter, Blogger, YouTube, and online news sites. Whether respondents relied on modern sources of information and whether they were used by a wide cross-section of Lebanon's complex sectarian backdrop can tell us more about whether new media help to increase, or alleviate, sectarian determinism in the long-term process of democratisation.

In analysing the attributions given for the reasons and causes contributing to the Arab Spring mobilisations, Lebanese public opinion was divided along two dimensions of contributory *reasons*: the first included widespread poverty, external interference with domestic politics, and newly empowered youth; the other dimension included a lack of political representation, a lack of social inclusion, and the imposition of Sharia law.

Demands associated with the *causes* of the revolts were divided along five dimensions: the first consisted in the lack of jobs and opportunities; the second, revenge for lost relatives and friends; the third, the formation of a Sharia state; and the fourth, foreign intervention. The fifth dimension, however, was the most robust and included a host of reasons under one category – which we term the "democratisation demands" index – and included: freedom, security, anti-corruption, human rights, multi-party elections, constitutional reform, religious rights, and the overthrow of oppressive regimes as overlapping causes of the popular revolts.

With regard to how the Lebanese public ascribes responsibility for protests in the Arab region, respondents' judgments diverge between domestic and international actors. Domestic political actors seen as responsible for activating and leading the revolts were divided among four dimensions: first, political parties; second, religious associations and the military; third, foreign agents and expatriates; and fourth, civil society, intellectuals, independents, and youth as a unified composite reflecting civil society actors. This fourth category was the most robust and overlapping category – we refer to this as the "domestic civil society" index because they all belong to a domestic set of actors promoting democratic transition from within states.

Similarly, the role of foreign actors was also divided among four dimensions: first, Iran; second, Israel; third, Russia and China; and lastly, the composite of

TABLE 2	Most Watched TV Channels by Lebanese Viewers		
TV Channel	**Full Name**	**Sectarian Affiliation**	**Type**
Al-Jazeera	Al-Jazeera	Sunni	Hard News
Al-Arabia	Al-Arabia	Sunni	Hard News
Al-Manar	Al-Manar	Shia	Hard News
Future TV	Future Television	Sunni	Hard News
LBC	Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation	Christian & Mixed	Soft News
MTV	Murr Television	Christian & Mixed	Soft News
NBN	National Broadcasting Lebanon	Shia	Hard News
NTV	New Television	Shia & Mixed	Soft News
OTV	Orange Television	Christian	Hard News

the United States, Turkey, the Arab League, the Conference of Islamic States, NATO, the UN, and the EU. This last dimension included actors traditionally understood as coming from Western democracies, emerging democracies, as well as Arab and Islamic regimes. It is important to note, then, that Iran, Israel, and Russia and China are excluded from this overlapping dimension in the perceptions of "foreign influence" therefore suggesting that public opinion separates them discernibly from the rest. This fourth dimension, because it combines foreign states from the "Western world" as well as regional states from the Arab/Muslim world, suggests that the Lebanese public does not necessarily ascribe to the traditional dichotomy proscribed by Samuel Huntington's famed "clash of civilizations" hypothesis, and instead is critically focused on the foreign influence of neighbouring belligerent states like Iran and Israel in the regional politics of the Middle East.

Overall, the Lebanese public may be making use of new information outlets in "new media" but no differences arise between using Facebook versus Twitter as far as specific digital platforms are concerned. Therefore, new media outlets may be an important new vehicle to access news and learn about politics, but Lebanese citizens do so with little partiality. This gives us evidence to reject popular technologically-deterministic hypotheses that suggested that these revolts were "Twitter revolutions" or "Facebook revolutions" simply because of the immense popularity of these respective platforms. They may have been very important for the process of short-term mobilising, but as platforms for long-term political socialising, citizens see them as one and the same.

In contrast, uses of the diverse television outlets available in Lebanon diverge along two clear dimensions, while other individual outlets are clearly fa-

voured along sectarian lines. The divisions in content differences and political leanings of television stations may also be more divisive than the uses of digital media platforms. It should also be noted that the most-watched TV stations were those that are the least sectarian driven and most affiliated with modern global culture (less politically charged and more focused on entertainment content).

How can these dimensions of public opinion help us better understand ethnic and religious polarisation in divided but multi-sectarian states, like Lebanon? In the second set of analyses, we apply these dimensions of public opinion to closely examine six Lebanese religious sects' attitudes towards the Arab revolts, as well as identify major fault lines that exist in its public opinion landscape. To provide a comparative context and understanding, we present the findings by sectarian group, so as to provide a composite profile of each community:

The Catholic Maronites differed most significantly from the other five sects by ascribing the lowest levels of importance to newspaper and radio news. Similarly, the Orthodox sect ascribed the lowest levels of importance to television news, particularly news outlets like Al-Jazeera, Al-Arabia, Al-Manar, Future TV, NBN, and OTV – overtly political and partisan news outlets. More than any other Christian sectarian group, the non-Maronite Catholics had the most polarised opinions and media habits – they were the least interested in following the latest news about the MENA revolts, but when they did so, primarily relied on "old" media like the radio and were the least likely to use "new" media like the Internet. They also ascribed the least credit to economic issues like widespread poverty/unemployment, external interference, and the youth bulge as the most important reasons for unrest; and instead perceived

foreign agents and/or foreign expatriates, with particular emphasis on Israel's involvement, as the prime causes of the protests. They were also the least optimistic about the future political orientations of newly formed MENA states than any other group (fearing a movement towards a military takeover). In addition to being the smallest and perhaps most vulnerable Christian community in Lebanon's heterogeneous socio-political mix, this was also the oldest cohort by age group, and may provide some additional context to the dominant use of traditional media, concerns about external involvement (e.g. Israel), and little optimism for political liberalisation.

Beyond the three major Christian sects, Lebanon also includes a diversity of Muslim sects that share political, economic and historical relationships with neighbouring societies in the Arab region. In this regard, the Sunni sect featured some prominent points of polarisation, particularly in its approval of newspapers as the most important source of news, as well as the highest levels of "new" media uses, including Facebook, Twitter, Blogger, YouTube, and online news sites. This sect was also the least likely to view LBC, MTV, and NTV – outlets oriented more towards "soft-news" content. In contrast to Catholics, Sunni respondents were the most likely to ascribe widespread economic issues like poverty/unemployment, external interference, and the youth bulge as the core reasons for the unrest. The Sunni sect was the most likely to ascribe "jobs and opportunities" as a reason for the protests, as well as the assorted "democratisation demands" including: freedom, security, anti-corruption, human rights, multi-party elections, constitutional reform, religious rights, and the overthrow of repressive regimes. Demand for political liberalisation and democratisation, then, was a salient feature in Sunni reactions. Not surprisingly, the Sunni contingency was also most likely to credit "civil society" actors as the most active participants during the protests, including: civil society organisations, intellectuals, independents, and youth. Sunnis, on the other hand, were more likely to be receptive to the "hard-news" TV outlets such as the Hezbollah-sponsored Al-Manar station and Amal Movement's NBN station. Notably, Shia and Sunni respondents differed deeply on which of the major causes of the Arab Spring they found most important. Shia respondents often cite external conspiracy theories as the primary cause of the Arab Spring and

attribute secondary reasons for poor economic conditions and the newly empowered but disenfranchised youth. This difference in opinion seems to reflect the impact of the Syrian uprising on the Lebanese respondents' perceptions of the Arab Spring, where sectarian Shia-Sunni rifts seem most evident. Thus, despite consensus on the general description of the causes of the upheavals, the Shia minority emerges to be most pessimistic about the aftermath, attributing conspiracy theories rather than domestic conditions for the Arab Spring.

Finally, like the Catholic sect, the Druze sect is about the same relatively small size, but in contrast is notably more politically active. The survey data also revealed that Druze respondents followed the events of the Arab Spring more closely than any other sect in the country. High level of attention to the news also seems related with their low approval of the objectivity of the news – they watched the most news, and were the most critical of the coverage. Most astoundingly, the Druze minority is also more "new" media-savvy than any other (and gives the lowest importance to "old" media like television and newspapers). Politically, they cited a lack of political representation, lack of social inclusion, and imposition of Sharia law as core reasons for the revolts. But in contrast to the Sunni contingency, they also believed "democratisation demands" (freedom, security, anti-corruption, human rights, multi-party elections, constitutional reform, religious rights, and overthrow of repressive regimes) were the least important issues voiced during protests. In terms of the approval of foreign actors' involvement, the Druze sect was the most internationally inclined, with the highest approval ratings of all countries except Russia, China, Israel, and particularly Iran (lowest of all six groups).

Comparative Sectarianism and the Arab Spring

While descriptive profiles of sectarian divisions may be illuminating, it is difficult to assess the variance and significance of differences in meanings without stronger statistical tests. To understand whether these descriptive differences are meaningfully distant from each other, we must understand how significantly different or distant each sect is from the other. Being able to make stronger statements about polarisation in Lebanese politics requires us to go

beyond description to understand whether seemingly divergent opinion trends, in fact, present an atmosphere for the polarisation of public opinion in reactions to the Arab Spring. To address this, we tested whether or not the overall average opinions for each major battery of questions differed statistically between minority sects. Based on these differences, we can arrive at strong comparative conclusions about the current state of affairs in post-protest Lebanese public opinion.

First, the findings showed major differences between sectarian groups in their media use habits, which importantly shape exposure to different sources of political information and perspectives. The Sunni sect has the highest level of importance towards newspapers (the Maronite sect has the lowest), and the least level of importance towards "soft-news" television networks like LBC, MTV, and NTV. Similarly, the Druze sect has the highest level of importance ascribed to the Internet, while the Catholic sect has the lowest. Each sect described here was significantly or marginally significantly polarised from the other in terms of the types and sources of media used to learn about public and political life during the protest periods.

Second, in terms of perceptions of the causes of the revolts, the Sunni sect felt marginally more strongly than all other groups that failures of economic development, like poverty, external interference, and the youth bulge, were most responsible for the Arab Spring. The fact that these differences were only marginally significant indicates that there is a general consensus building in Lebanon that issues of poverty, dangers of external interferences, and youth discontent may lead to more periods of contention if not properly addressed – this set of concerns seem to unite Lebanese sects more than divide them. Similarly, in terms of the most vocal demands from protesters during the revolts, the Shia sect differed only marginally significantly from all other sects in viewing "foreign support/intervention" as a key demand. However, this may increase to become a more significant divide as current events in Syria slip towards sectarian civil war with a high level of foreign intervention.

Third, in terms of international organisations and external powers shaping the outcomes of the Arab Spring, it is important to note that the Shia sect most strongly approved the roles of Iran, Russia, and China, while Sunni and Druze sects most negatively evaluated their roles. In fact, in the social fabric of Lebanese politics, the Shia sect is most clearly alienated from its neighbouring Muslim communities, rather than from its neighbouring Christians. For example, the Shia sect was significantly more optimistic about the roles of Russia and China than Sunnis. The majority of respondents also pointed to a perceived lack of "freedom" by Arab youth, poor economic opportunities in uprising countries, and the interference of foreign nations as the main causes of the Arab Spring. Notably, Shia Muslim and Sunni Muslim respondents differed deeply on which of the major causes of the Arab Spring they found most important. Sunni Muslims, who share the same sect as the majority of the rebelling population in the Arab Spring, except in Bahrain, emphasised the lack of political freedom. Shia Muslims, in contrast, cited external conspiracy as the primary cause of the Arab Spring. Thus, despite consensus on the general description of the causes of the upheavals, the Shia minority emerges most pessimistic, attributing foreign conspiracy over authentic domestic reasons for the Arab Spring.

Beyond the desire for greater political freedom, economic disparity is also cited as the strongest factor causing the Arab Spring. Economic disparity, according to most respondents, encompasses both a lack of opportunity to find employment and government corruption that impedes the ordinary Arab's ability to sustain their livelihood. In this regard, the respondents are echoing several respected international organisation's diagnosis of the economic malaise that is afflicting the region. According to the International Labour Organization's 2011 report on Global Employment the MENA region has the world's highest rate of unemployment by region at 10%; with 23% of its youth population unemployed. Transparency International cites corruption caused by authoritarian governments controlling large bureaucracies that crowd out public participation in the economy as a condition that suffocates economic opportunity in the MENA region.

Regarding the neighbouring and international non-Arab states viewed as important actors in the future of democratisation, the predominantly Shia Iran's role in the Arab uprising was viewed more positively by Lebanese Shia than by Sunni, while mostly Sunni Turkey's role in the Arab uprising was viewed more positively by Lebanese Sunni than by Maronite

TABLE 3	**Which Group Do You Think Was Most Active during the Protests?**		
	Factor 1	**Factor 2**	**Communality**
Independents	**0.681**	-0.363	0.704
Intellectuals	**0.675**	-0.335	0.657
Civil Society	**0.614**	0.053	0.613
Youth	**0.582**	-0.041	0.710
Military/Thuwar	0.146	**0.625**	0.662
Religious Associations	0.387	**0.605**	0.542
Foreign Agents	0.079	**0.575**	0.561
Expatriates	0.295	0.087	0.464
Political Parties	0.348	0.196	0.682
Eigenvalue	2.020	1.38	
% of Total Variance	22.45%	15.36%	
Total Variance			**37.81%**

Catholics. In spite of this diversity of opinion, respondents of *all* sectarian affiliations display a strong dislike for the role of the United States or Israel in the Arab Spring. Continued suspicion of the United States and Israel's policies in the MENA region united the respondents.

The media and its use appear as a strong shaper and mobiliser of sectarian opinion. Future research will need to investigate the extent to which these differences do in fact contribute towards opinion polarisation between sects. Evidently, minorities' views toward the prospects and the promises of the Arab Spring are mixed, but are divided along sectarian lines. While conversions are expressed in cross-cutting cleavages rationalising protesters' demands, sectarian rifts have widened among competing minorities with regards to civil wars and foreign interventions. Both the 'clash of civilizations' and 'democratic waves' views appear to have been synthesised by minorities' views toward democratic revolutions in the Arab world.

Acknowledgements

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