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RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY AND SECTARIANISM IN LEBANON

Alexander D. M. Henley

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About the Author

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Henley is a historian of religion in the modern Middle East, with particular interest in the places where religion, politics, and conflict meet. His research has focused on religious leaders in Lebanon, looking at how communities have (re)created religious leaderships for their contemporary Lebanese context and exploring their relation to the problem of sectarianism. In the course of this research, Henley has worked especially with the Sunni, Druze, and Maronite communities in Beirut and beyond.

Summary

Lebanese religious leaders are often treated as authentic representatives of their sects and are given broad powers over religious affairs. However, their leadership is not organic, nor are they necessarily popular, as these individuals are trained and selected by elite institutions. These figures do not incite sectarian hatred, and even aim to reduce it, but the way they are empowered and their monopoly on spiritual matters inhibit social integration among various religious communities and reinforce sectarian divisions.

The Complex Role of Lebanese Religious Leaders

- Religious leadership is inherently ambiguous, combining two roles: that of spiritual authorities on matters of religious doctrine and behavior, and that of public spokesmen for broader religious communities.
- Lebanon's political system institutionalizes the representation of various religious sects and grants their leaders broad powers over religious affairs, including personal-status courts, wealthy endowments, places of worship, education, and the centralized employment of clerics.
- Religious leaders do not exist in isolation from politics. They are products of and selected by elite institutions, not by popular mandate. These figures often are not truly representative of their presumed constituents, who are not religiously bound to follow them.
- Despite this, foreign diplomats and political leaders in neighboring countries increasingly view religious leaders as representative interlocutors when engaging sectarian constituencies in divided societies.

The Mixed Impact of Lebanese Religious Leaders on Sectarianism

- Lebanese religious leaders do not incite sectarian hatred. They are invested in coexisting within and preserving the political system that confers their power.
- In some respects, religious representatives are well-placed to defuse sectarian tension. They tend to publically oppose the politicization of sectarian divisions, and can be instrumental in deradicalization.

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- But the way Lebanon recognizes and empowers exclusivist religious leaders also exacerbates the country's difficulty in faithfully representing its religious diversity. These leaders promote narrow orthodoxies that marginalize and at times radicalize nonconformists such as Islamists or secularists.
- Religious leaders help perpetuate a sectarian system that inhibits social integration and has suppressed the representation of diversity rather than improved it. Their monopoly over religious affairs maintains divisions between citizens and confines them to communally bound lives.

Introduction: The Paradoxes of Lebanon's Religious Leaders

In Lebanon, as in many Middle Eastern countries, common myths surrounding religious leadership and sectarianism appear to be the basis for policy by Middle Eastern officials and Western diplomats alike. These myths may stem partly from a lingering stereotype of Islam as having no clergy and being, therefore, less institutionalized than many Christian churches. Yet that stereotype is less true than ever after a century or more of state-driven modernization. Institutional contexts are key to understanding the roles of Islamic and other religious leaders in Lebanon today.

Moreover, the influence of the state system in the Middle East has been pervasive, restructuring every facet of social life including the religious lives of the region's numerous sects.¹ One must be wary of imagining the modern state to be the binary opposite of sectarianism and religious leaders, as if it has not been deeply implicated in their development for a century or more.

The case of Lebanon shows how senior religious leaders are generally more representative of an array of clerical and political elites than of a community of ordinary believers. These individuals are also likely to be shaped by the culture of the state and of the national public before which they are supposed to represent their community. One result of these particular institutional and cultural contexts is that Lebanese religious leaders have repeatedly demonstrated both the ability and will to combat sectarian antagonisms through their public rhetoric and posturing.

Still, the societal function of Lebanon's religious leaders and their relationship to the issue of sectarianism raise core questions of representation, such as, can these leaders be taken to legitimately represent religious communities?

Such questions have become acute in the Middle East more generally, where sectarianism is an ever-growing concern. Like Lebanon, countries such as Iraq and Syria are viewed by many as deeply divided societies, most saliently along religious or sectarian lines.

Yet since the country's establishment, Lebanon—alone among Middle Eastern countries—has had a political system based on the representation of sects. The Lebanese state recognizes eighteen sects, the formal representatives of which have a variety of powers by virtue of their relationship with the state. This includes five Islamic sects (Sunni, Shia, Druze, Alawite, and Ismaili); the Maronites and eleven other Christian sects; and the Jewish community.²

Institutional contexts are key to understanding the roles of Islamic and other religious leaders in Lebanon today.

Within their communities, religious leaders are legally responsible for managing religious affairs, sitting atop nationwide hierarchies of clerics who run places of worship, schools, and personal-status courts that adjudicate many aspects of the daily lives of Lebanese citizens, including marriage, divorce, and inheritance. Outside their communities, they function as spokesmen in their communities' interactions with public authorities.

Lebanon's long history with formal religious representation makes it a valuable prism through which to study the many dimensions of state engagement with religious leaders, as well as the realities and myths of religious leaders' connection to sectarianism. Are they truly representative of Lebanese society's sectarian diversity? As leaders, are they implicated in the problem of sectarianism?

Lebanon's religious leaders tend to reflect a series of paradoxes that greatly complicate any facile interpretation of their roles. While they are religious rep-

representatives, their leadership is not organic. Rather, they are products of elite clerical hierarchies, and so represent particular institutions before their communities at large.

Religious leaders also have to manage an inherent ambiguity in their roles, whereby they must navigate a gray zone between their strictly religious roles and their broader duties as communal representatives. While the

first demands qualities inherent to religion tied to their standing as members of an institutional elite, communal representativeness tends to require a broader popular mandate.

And while religious representatives are not politicians, they are also not apolitical. As their recognition as representatives is normalized, these religious leaders often find themselves caught up in an interplay of local, national, and regional political interests.

Perhaps the most singular paradox is that though Lebanese religious leaders have not incited sectarian hatred and may, in fact, be well-placed to defuse sectarian tensions, at the same time they embody a system of separate confessional regimes for family law and education that keeps communities separate and rigidly defined.

This complex reality casts doubt on the benefits of assuming that states' engagement of religious leaders implies engagement of their communities at large. One cannot take for granted that they are spokesmen for sectarian diversity, and should consider carefully the implications of further entrenching their positions as such. While it is an advantage that Lebanese religious leaders, or indeed religious leaders in other Arab countries, can help deradicalize sectarian tensions, the normalization of their roles as interlocutors also empowers institutions that divide populations and exclude nonconformists.

In other words, in seeking out allegedly authentic representatives through contacts with religious leaders, outside interlocutors may, in fact, be contributing to a system that only undermines broad representation. Effectively, this

Religious leaders . . . must navigate a gray zone between their strictly religious roles and their broader duties as communal representatives.

reinforces a confessional framework from which not a few Lebanese seek to break out. Lebanon's rigid system of religious representation and its highly problematic political order based on confessional power-sharing among elites have created a crisis of representation in the country. The consequences for stability and national cohesion have become more apparent as the state has failed to meet popular expectations.

Religious Leaders as Imperfect Representatives

Top religious leaders in Lebanon are regular interlocutors on the rounds made by foreign emissaries seeking to negotiate a solution to the latest political crisis or standoff. French President François Hollande's visit to Beirut in April 2016 was a case in point. It included meetings with the religious heads of the six largest communities as part of a two-day whirlwind tour.³ The root rationale for such visits is generally understood to be addressing a problem that follows from some aspect of sectarian tension—today, this is usually between Sunni and Shia Muslims, whereas until the 1980s it was usually between Christians and Muslims.

On the assumption that sectarianism is the deeper social problem of which bickering politicians are just a symptom, it can seem like common sense to go to the source by speaking to the heads of the sects concerned. After all, to whom better to talk when trying to understand what makes religious communities tick than their official leaders who have recognized authority over their flocks? So who are these religious leaders in Lebanon, and what do they represent?

Religious Leaders as Unrepresentative Elites

Religious leaders are often perceived as more natural representatives of sectarian diversity than politicians. Influential political blogger Mustapha Hamoui, who regards Lebanon's collective religious leaders as “a sort of defacto [sic] Senate,” explains that this is because they “traditionally get up in arms and mobilize the faithful whenever an issue is perceived to threaten the influence of their faith.”⁴ Whereas the parliament is, in one scholar's words, electorally engineered to be “a body of generally moderate views,” religious leaders are more in tune with their sects' divergent identities and aspirations.⁵

The religious institutions that religious leaders occupy have an aura of permanence that makes them appear essential to the traditional character of their respective communities. Kamal Salibi, a well-known historian in Lebanon, once called a given sect's religious institution “a repository for its historical experience” that by implication embodies all that makes its community different from its neighbors.⁶ Indeed, press photographs of Hollande with assorted clerics in Beirut in 2016 were eerily similar to images of their clerical predecessors

going all the way back to 1920,⁷ when another Frenchman, General Henri Gouraud, recognized “the spiritual leaders of all confessions and rites” in his declaration of Lebanese statehood.⁸ There is a long precedent in Lebanon for

These religious leaders, however, are not nearly as representative of the faithful as tends to be assumed.

engaging religious leaders as interlocutors within a sectarian society. This precedent helped legitimize the practice of dealing with sectarian representatives in Lebanon.

These religious leaders, however, are not nearly as representative of the faithful as tends to be assumed. Being products of particular institutional politics, they have no more natural, or organic, connection to their communi-

ties than any politician does—indeed, potentially far less so. Even the term “leader” is in many cases a misnomer, as it implies a popular following that many prominent clerics do not necessarily enjoy. Indeed, by assuming the contrary, one may be reinforcing, rather than simply recognizing, religious leaders and institutions of sectarianism in the region.

The heads of religious institutions are chosen from among their respective clerical classes—Sunni *ulama*, Druze *uqqal*, Maronite clergymen, and so on. While all of them may be “men of religion” (*rijal din*), the term embraces a vast diversity in terms of functions, education, and motivations, between different sects and even within them. Clerics are often imagined to be believers par excellence, but people may enter the clergy for many reasons, and they often express a tremendous variety of interpretations of their faiths.

Moreover, the specialized education and sometimes rarified lives of clerics arguably set their religious experience far apart from that of the broader population. Particular institutional hierarchies have their own self-perpetuating cultures and norms, often including quite specific views on religious orthodoxy, which distance them from popular religion. Leaders are chosen from among this class of professional religious practitioners, but generally not simply according to strictly religious criteria. Indeed, virtually no head of a Lebanese community in the past century has been widely recognized for his excellence in theological learning, spiritual wisdom, or purity of faith.

Each Lebanese religious community has an electoral process through which its official leader is chosen, usually by a very limited and male-dominated elite, from an even more exclusive group of men. Elected candidates are almost always middle- or upper-level bureaucrats in a given sect’s central clerical administration. They are very rarely charismatic individuals with a popular following, and frequently the opposite is true. Religious leaders are usually uncontroversial compromise candidates who have gained a modest name for themselves through their reliable services as judges or administrators in their religious establishments’ Beirut headquarters.

A notable exception is the late Shia cleric Musa al-Sadr, who lacked any clerical or scholarly distinction but was dubbed imam by his supporters, tens of thousands of whom rallied to his progressive reform movement in the 1960s and

1970s. Sadr leveraged this popularity to create his own institution of religious leadership for Lebanon's Shia, the Higher Islamic Shiite Council, for which he gained official recognition from the government. By contrast, his successors have been products of the institution rather than inheritors of his magnetism.

Electoral systems for the spiritual heads of Lebanese sects have evolved over the past several decades. The original model may be that of the Maronite Church—its council is not only an electoral body but also a legislative one, governing the church in conjunction with the patriarch. This council of bishops is appointed by the patriarch and, in turn, elects a new patriarch from among its members when the old one dies (or retires, as the last two have done).⁹

Many of Lebanon's other major religious communities have adopted roughly equivalent models of unitary elected leadership, combined with corporate governance by a council of some kind. Under the Ottoman regime (from about 1516 to 1918), Sunni muftis of Beirut and other cities were elected by an informal gathering of salaried judges, preachers, and imams of that given city, albeit with the final decision going to the sheikh al-Islam, the empire's highest-ranking religious official in Istanbul.

After Lebanese independence, as the Sunni, Shia, and Druze communities sought to formalize the structures of their religious leaderships within a Lebanese state framework, successive laws were passed to define and redefine the workings of their leadership structures. These were shaped to a significant extent by political interests. Since Islamic institutions depend on state recognition, such laws had to be passed through the parliament, which gave politicians, not clerics, the final say on their content. Not surprisingly, then, the Muslim communities all developed legislative councils with *ex officio* seats for all current and former parliamentarians and ministers.

Unlike Middle Eastern countries such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Syria—in which the governments either directly or indirectly appoint senior religious leaders—Lebanon's communal power-sharing system makes its state structure considerably looser. This also means that the Lebanese state is not identified with any particular sect. The Lebanese government, therefore, does not appoint religious officials.

However, government recognition in Lebanon is still crucial to the exercise of privileges and powers granted to religious leaders by law or protocol. That is why, at times, factions with enough seats in government have been able to withhold recognition from a given religious official, opening the way for his replacement with a more favorable candidate.¹⁰ This kind of situation has arisen with regard to the highest-ranking Druze religious figure, the sheikh al-aql, as well as with regard to the Sunni Higher Islamic Council and its appointments to regional offices.¹¹

Religious leaders may present themselves as authentically representative of religious communities on the basis of tradition or cultural ownership of their

The specialized education and sometimes rarified lives of clerics arguably set their religious experience far apart from that of the broader population.

sect's identity. However, giving such individuals a privileged place in policy consultations to help deal with the problem of sectarianism means that their claims and status must be scrutinized and not simply taken at face value.

Religious Leaders Are Not Necessarily Popular

Because high-level religious leaders in Lebanon are generally drawn from elites and emerge from institutional apparatuses, and in a number of cases are dependent on the state, there is no cultural expectation that they be followed blindly—or at all. They are not “of the people,” nor are they necessarily regarded as being “for the people.”

In the vast majority of Islamic traditions, religious leaders are conceived not as binding authorities but as more or less educated religious specialists with specific functions in society.¹² These include preaching, leading prayers, offering spiritual guidance, or interpreting Islamic law, or sharia.

Sunni Muslims would generally not regard themselves as followers of any religious leader other than the Prophet Muhammad himself.¹³ Sunni notions of religious authority are based on the rather fluid notion of consensus (*ijmaa*), allowing even the most pious to pick and choose quite legitimately between the opinions of different *ulama*, be they grand muftis or independent individuals.

Shia Islam does have a tradition of religious leadership and followership, with the convention that the Shia ought to subscribe to a single living “source of emulation” (*marjaa taqlid*), among a number of recognized senior scholars.¹⁴ Yet even this system is highly fluid, belying the cliché that the Shia are religiously obligated to obey their religious leader. One may follow a *marjaa* anywhere in the world, and switch from one to another.

In Lebanon's case, for example, there was until recently one Lebanese *marjaa*, Ayatollah Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah, who died in 2010. He was undoubtedly popular among the Shia of Lebanon; however, even those who decided to follow a particular *marjaa* were under no obligation to choose Fadlallah, being

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free to pick any one among dozens of others in Iraq, Iran, and elsewhere. Many of his committed followers, moreover, would have distinguished his authority on religious matters from any discussion of politics, as such questions are the subject of open debate among Shia.

To further complicate the picture, Fadlallah was never recognized as the official head of the Lebanese Shia community, a position occupied since 2000 by Sheikh Abdel-

Amir Qabalan, a cleric of lesser scholarly standing, but a long-serving member of the Higher Islamic Shiite Council, which was created to represent and organize the community in 1967.¹⁵ Hezbollah's turbaned secretary general, Hassan Nasrallah, arguably the most powerful of Lebanon's Shia clerics, also competes with his more conventional counterparts for the ear of the community, despite his low standing as a religious expert.

Asking whether any one of the three is the broader Lebanese Shia community's real religious leader, more authentic than the others, is to miss the point. All three emerged from the community, although all of them in that process required some kind of support from outside the community or the country—whether foreign clerics and religious institutions, Lebanese politicians, or state sponsors.

Leadership in this context does not imply authority—let alone exclusive authority—over a preexisting following. However, that is not to say that formal offices of religious leadership do not have enormous potential to reach a public audience and gain a following. Lebanese examples include Sunni grand mufti Hassan Khaled, who was assassinated in 1989,¹⁶ and the late Druze sheikh al-aql at the time, Muhammad Abou Shaqra, both of whom became focal points for their communities during Lebanon's civil war (1975–1990). In difficult times, with state services and patron networks of distribution disrupted, these figures were able to bring their influence and institutional resources to bear, arguably adopting from the political class the function of *zaim* (patron).

Former Maronite patriarch Nasrallah Sfeir, who retired in 2011,¹⁷ could also be said to have earned popularity by stepping in to fill a leadership vacuum in the 1990s, when the defeated Christian political elite was in exile or suppressed. Just as Hassan Khaled had rallied the leaderless Sunnis during the war and held coordination meetings for what remained of their political leadership during the 1980s, Sfeir did so for the Maronites during their postwar nadir. He launched a Maronite revival movement to boost morale during the time of the Syrian presence (in the 1990s and 2000s) and combat the problem of mass emigration. He used the national and global resources of the Maronite Church to instill a new faith in Lebanon among a generation of young Christians that had known only war, underlining that Lebanon was a sacred homeland for Christians.

Maronites belong to the wider Catholic Church, and so a major patron of this Maronite revival effort was Pope John Paul II himself, with his superstar personality, who visited Lebanon in 1997 to promote the slogan that “Lebanon is more than a country, it is a message.”¹⁸ This was immortalized in a papal document titled “A New Hope for Lebanon.”¹⁹ The document helped raise global awareness of the combined Syrian and Israeli occupations of Lebanon, culminating in Sfeir's sponsorship of the Qornet Shehwan gathering, a broad coalition of Christian politicians and intellectuals that began speaking out against Syrian hegemony from 2001 onward.²⁰

But as these diverse examples suggest, religious commitment among the Lebanese does not necessarily translate into commitment to religious leaders. In each case of a Lebanese religious leader gaining a large popular following, it has been due to a favorable combination of sociopolitical circumstances on the one hand, and the execution of a winning public relations strategy on the

other. That is to say, broad popularity cannot be taken for granted, but must, to a significant extent, be earned once in office.

One need only ask around in Beirut to discover the cynicism with which religious leaders are commonly regarded, even among the most pious of any sect.²¹ Attitudes toward religious leaders have little to do with levels of religious commitment, and Lebanon is hardly exceptional in this regard. Just as religiosity is comparatively high across the Middle East, polls conducted by political scientist Theodor Hanf confirmed that “the Lebanese are a nation of believers.”²² A full 90 percent of those polled in 2006 stated that they tried to live according to the teachings of their religion, with very little variation by sect. Perhaps more surprisingly, this proportion of committed believers has been increasing steadily in recent decades, up from 75 percent in 1987 and 80 percent in 2002, with strong showings among the country’s youth. Hanf concluded, “In short, the Lebanese clergy of all religions have little reason to doubt the religiousness of the youngest generation.”²³

However, various Lebanese religious leaders have been met with vocal or even violent disapproval from their own believers. The most famous such incident took place during Lebanon’s civil war. There was a mass protest by many Maronites against Sfeir on November 5, 1989, denouncing his support for the Taif Accord, which brought Lebanon’s civil war to an end the next year under Syrian supervision.²⁴ Outraged supporters of Michel Aoun, a populist anti-Syrian general (and the current Lebanese president, elected in October 2016) who opposed the accord, burned tires outside several churches and stormed the patriarchal residence, assaulting Sfeir and forcing him to kiss Aoun’s picture.

Taking the fifteen years of Lebanon’s civil war as a whole, it is significant that while no senior Lebanese cleric came under physical attack from the militias of other sects, a number were killed, kidnapped, or roughed up by members

Religious commitment among the Lebanese does not necessarily translate into commitment to religious leaders.

of their own sect for their perceived wrongs.²⁵ Generally, public demonstrations against, or criticisms of, religious leaders are not uncommon. Former mufti Muhammad Rashid Qabbani was disliked and distrusted by many Sunnis for his political stances and alleged corruption, having to be rescued from an angry mob surrounding a Beirut mosque in December 2013.²⁶ Among the Druze, both the current sheikh al-aql, Naim Hassan, and his late predecessor, Bahjat Ghaith, faced smaller protests on the steps of the Druze religious headquarters in Beirut over alleged corruption and their perceived failure to use funds from religious endowments for the good of the community.²⁷

The ire or scorn of the faithful is often a reaction to specific actions or stances—in other words to the way religious leaders perform or abuse their leadership. But not all religious leaders are given the chance to disappoint, instead being written off from the moment of their accession to office. Hassan Khaled (who only became popular later), Qabbani, and successive Maronite

Patriarchs Antonios Khoreich and Nasrallah Sfeir initially received lukewarm welcomes from communities that regarded them as poor compromise candidates—uninspiring bureaucrats launched into leadership through no particular merits of their own.

Despite these ups and downs and the numerous factors that may contribute to the success or failure of a sitting religious official to attract a popular following, these offices do have an established place in public life. Religious leaderships are consistently listed among the most influential groups in Lebanon, alongside patrons, party chiefs, and ministers.²⁸ However, in polling carried out by Theodor Hanf over a period between 1981 and 2006, perceptions of their degree of influence fluctuated wildly, with between 3 percent and 23 percent of respondents identifying them as “most influential,” depending on the timing of the poll.²⁹

What the religious leaders generally have in their favor is a public platform and institutional resources that they can leverage to reach a wide audience. In a country such as Lebanon, whose government grants formal recognition to the religious heads of sects, these figures occupy a consistently high-profile place in the protocol of state matters and other public affairs. Religious feasts—especially those given the status of national holidays—provide near-guaranteed airtime on a regular basis for these representatives to address the public. Because of this platform, as well as whatever institutional capacities they have to disseminate messages to their flocks, Lebanese religious leaders have a powerful potential to influence, even if a positive reception by the public is far from guaranteed.

Religious Leadership Is Inherently Ambiguous

At the heart of religious leadership is an inherent ambiguity. Religious leaders are, of course, expected to possess characteristics such as religious expertise, piety, moral standing, and independence from political concerns. But they are also communal representatives, acknowledgment of which requires a broad electoral mandate and popular accountability.

Among all of Lebanon’s Islamic sects, there have been attempts to make religious leaderships more representative, as increasing national influence and even legal “immunities, rights, and privileges” for religious leaders have brought traditional modes of appointment under scrutiny for corruption.³⁰ Indeed, at times Lebanon’s communities have competed—especially during the golden era of Lebanese state building in the 1950s and 1960s—over the modernization of their religious leaderships. The processes by which religious representatives of sects were chosen sat uneasily alongside the democratic values being applied to the same communities’ political representatives.

Since 1955, for example, the Lebanese mufti of the republic has been elected not only by clerics, but also by lay Sunni representatives from various sectors of society, including government, the civil service, professional associations,

trade syndicates, and labor unions.³¹ The law defining the Shia community's jurisdiction, passed in 1967 by parliament and serving as a constitution, sought to adopt similar principles.³² It widened the pool of voters to elect a council, which, in turn, would elect the head of the Higher Islamic Shiite Council.

In 1962, the Druze community took the principle of democratic mandate the furthest, extending the vote for the sheikh al-aql to all Druze males above the age of twenty-one.³³ The community also took on the matter of candidacy, seeking to address the paradox of widening the number of electors while continuing to choose candidates from a tiny elite of qualified clerics. It did so by allowing anyone to stand for election as sheikh al-aql. Yet when this heightened concerns that those competing for the post were laymen unfit to represent the Druze or hold such a religiously significant position, the elections were cancelled.

Who or what exactly does a religious leader represent? That is the fundamental question with which Lebanon's sects have struggled ever since the country's first attempts at democratization over half a century ago. Religious leaders are recognized by governments as legitimate interlocutors on the basis that they are authorized as leaders to speak on behalf of their co-religionists and that as men of religion they speak the language that represents that group's distinctive religious identity.

Unfortunately, these two principles conflict with each other when put into practice. Speaking in the name of a religious belief system demands the independent, moral judgment of a religious specialist, who may only be properly recognized as such by other religious specialists. Speaking as a communal leader, in turn, requires accountability to a larger group of constituents.

This reality has been starkly illustrated by Lebanese attempts to make the system of official religious leadership less ambiguous and more transparent. The Druze experiment with opening nominations to laymen was a fiasco, and both the Druze and Sunni communities have rewritten their constitutions in recent decades to avoid ever having to hold broad-based elections. Anything but a small electoral college could introduce the need for clerics or their supporters to engage in unseemly public campaigning.

On the question of tenure as well, the paradox of religious representation has reared its head. While religious leaderships were conceived as lifelong positions, there have been more recent moves to limit their terms of office and make these officials more answerable to the electorate. Such efforts have been met with the argument that life tenure is necessary to give religious leaders the freedom to follow their conscience.³⁴ Clearly there are two conflicting conceptions of religious leadership at work here, and they cannot be reconciled through a coherent system of religious representation that can satisfy modern democratic impulses.

Religious Leaders Do Not Exist in Isolation From Politics

Powerful interests inevitably play a role in shaping electoral outcomes, even within religious institutions. In countries such as Lebanon, where many religious institutions are legally recognized and integrated into the framework of the state, politicians in the parliament and other government posts also have considerable influence over defining the electoral processes for religious offices. As these offices receive greater recognition as representatives of sectarian diversity, the stakes grow higher.

The interests in play are not only internal to the communities but are equally likely to be national or international. Foreign stakeholders in Lebanese Sunni politics, for instance, have been decisive in the elections of the last three grand muftis of the republic at least, going back to the 1960s. The three were all elected with near or total unanimity following foreign interventions of some kind: Hassan Khaled, after a visit to Egypt in 1966 to gain then president Gamal Abdel Nasser's approval; Muhammad Rashid Qabbani, after a visit to Syria in 1996 to gain then president Hafez al-Assad's approval; and Abdel Latif Derian, after an agreement was reached between Egypt and Saudi Arabia in 2014.³⁵

Where a particular political faction has had sufficient weight in parliament, they have sometimes been able to amend electoral laws to engineer overwhelmingly unanimous electoral outcomes in favor of particular religious leaders. The election of the grand mufti in 1996 is a case in point, with an amendment passed by parliament on the very morning that Qabbani was anointed.³⁶ That amendment reduced the number of electors from over one thousand to ninety-six.

A similar move was visible in the Druze community in 2006, enabled by the landslide victory of a single political bloc—led by Walid Joumblatt—in parliamentary elections the previous year.³⁷ The Syrian regime had up until then used an ambitious sheikh al-aql to act as a counterweight to the predominance of Joumblatt. However, Syria's waning influence from 2005 on allowed Joumblatt to win all the Druze seats in parliament and use them to bring to office a more compliant confessional council and religious leader.

Even the trajectory of the Shia cleric Musa al-Sadr, who did not fit the mold of most religious leaderships, was not immune to political machinations. The spectacular rise of this young, Iranian-accented cleric to national fame—even adulation—owes a great deal to his personal charisma and vision. He did not rise through the ranks of a party, as did Hezbollah's Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah, or through the Islamic scholarly milieu, as did Ayatollah Mohammed Hussein Fadlallah. However, even Sadr could not simply ride the wave of popular support into the office representing Lebanon's Shia. In order to overcome opposition from establishment politicians and clerics, he sided with then Lebanese president Fouad Shihab's government and its secret service, the *Deuxième Bureau*,³⁸ and later with Hafez al-Assad.

Religious leaders are only symbolically set apart from politics.

Religious leaders are only symbolically set apart from politics. Scratch the surface of these leaderships' inner workings, and they are inevitably bound up with the realities of local, national, and international power plays. In this way they are no different from any other institution in a region where the shortcomings of states have so often been filled by networks of patronage that erode any distinction between politics and society at large. It is naïve, therefore, to look to religious leaders as individuals that allow the bypassing of political representatives and to see them as more direct interlocutors with sects. Nor are the influences on religious leadership by any means restricted to stakeholders within their own communities. As valuable power bases, religious institutions invite intervention from other interested compatriots and foreigners alike.

Religious Leaders and the Problem of Sectarianism

The link between religious leaders and divisive religious identities seems self-evident. The “persistence” of strong religious leadership almost a century after the establishment of modern nation states in the Middle East is said to indicate these states' failure to overcome sectarian identities.³⁹

At the same time, secularist critics tend to accuse religious leaders of promoting sectarianism as a cynical means of self-preservation or through sheer narrow-minded fanaticism. Therefore, many civil society activists in the Middle East regard religious institutions, which might elsewhere be considered a valuable part of civil society, with intense suspicion.⁴⁰ There is, in short, a widespread view of religious leaders as somehow both products and perpetuators of sectarianism, creating preconceptions that obscure much of their actual relationship with sectarianism.

Because top-level religious leaders do not simply arise through popular acclamation, whether religious or sectarian, their status is far more dependent upon the culture and politics of elites at various levels of the clerical hierarchy, the community, the nation, and the region. What this means is that the factors shaping their behavior are complex and cannot be reduced to a few conventional motivations. While religious leaders may well personify Lebanon's sectarian system, they generally do not promote sectarian hatred as a means of reinforcing their authority. In fact, often the contrary is true.

Religious Leaders Tend Not to Incite Sectarian Hatred

None of the religious heads of Lebanon's sects indulges in overt sectarian rhetoric. Nor, generally, have any of them since independence in 1943.⁴¹ This may surprise some Lebanese, who recall images of finger-wagging clerics perhaps

standing with militia leaders responsible for wartime atrocities or using political language associated with a particular sectarian bloc.

However, the reality is that religious leaders often have to walk a fine line in terms of rhetoric and behavior among their own community, the political elite, and other communities. In order to avoid being ostracized and isolated, they usually take pains to remain in favor with the elite, in that way maximizing their own influence through their ability to engage in gentle persuasion or soft negotiation. At the same time, they avoid straying too far from the dominant political values of their own community, let alone the values of coexistence that are a part of Lebanese political life.⁴²

So, for example, during the civil war, then Grand Mufti Hassan Khaled held regular meetings with leaders of the Muslim-Leftist coalition, including the Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat. Similarly, Maronite Patriarchs Antonios Khoreich and Nasrallah Sfeir hosted summits with Christian politicians-cum-warlords.⁴³ These efforts to remain in the loop—that is, to maintain their influence within their communities—sometimes looked to outsiders like oppositional sectarian stances. Hence former members of Christian militias recall that when Hassan Khaled gave a speech, “it was an occasion for us to spit on the television.”⁴⁴ However, when compared, the core agenda of the grand mufti was very similar to that of the patriarchs: limited reform of the political system to ensure equal participation, negotiated through constitutional channels between fellow Lebanese.

The rhetoric of Lebanon’s various top religious leaders has been remarkably consistent throughout the years of war and peace.⁴⁵ These leaders valorize common ideals of citizenship, civility, and self-sacrifice for the nation, which they explain in terms of their religious traditions. The virtues of patience and the denial of one’s own desires or private interests are themes often sounded during Ramadan, Lent, and Easter. Religious vocabulary is translated into political language: faith in Lebanon as a final homeland for all believers; peace and national salvation as the fruit of moral values, moderation, and obedience to the law; and even surrender of the material interests of the sect for the greater good of the nation.

In this context, it is worth remembering that high-profile religious leaders in Middle Eastern countries including Lebanon head institutions that are integrated into, or at least heavily invested in, the modern state order. They may supervise personal-status courts, run publicly owned mosques, receive salaries from the state budget, benefit from government funding of Islamic religious colleges, and so on. That is why they must, in some regard, adhere to the prevailing ideology of the state, which, in Lebanon at least, is heavily reliant on an ideal of cohabitation between the communities, no matter how divided communal life may be in practice.

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In Lebanon as elsewhere, religious leaders not only benefit profoundly from state recognition and inclusion in national public life but also are particularly vulnerable when politics gives way to violence—both in terms of how it might affect their material resources and the fact that their precarious capacity for soft power is diminished during periods of conflict. “Their privileged role,” as one scholar of Lebanon puts it, is “mainly due to the fact that there is a balance to maintain between the many religious communities.”⁴⁶ It is the principle of confessional coexistence that helps keep these men in the limelight of public affairs as the doyens of dialogue. In Lebanon—and in many other cases—it is their diplomatic skills and record of sectarian political correctness that make them appropriate candidates for public religious offices in the first place.

Religious Leaders’ Potential Role in Defusing Sectarian Tension

Cynical observers sometimes suggest that the sectarian political correctness of top religious leaders is simply a form of doublespeak.⁴⁷ Certainly sectarian politics in Lebanon and other countries in the region often incentivize politicians to present bland platitudes to national or regional publics while reserving more divisive rhetoric for audiences within their own communities. Most religious leaders, however, are not generally driven by the electoral concerns that make this an attractive or a necessary strategy for politicians. Nor do they have the means available to politicians for pushing a sectarian agenda: direct involvement in government or legislative policymaking, or in certain cases even sponsorship of sectarian militias.

For religious leaders, words are their most effective weapon, and double-speak would only blunt that weapon. On this basis, these religious leaders can be taken at their word as genuine opponents of a divisive, conflictual sectarianism. Much of their power lies in using—or threatening to use—their platform to sway the public for or against the policies of politicians. In practice they tend to avoid rocking the boat too much for fear of being excluded from the political elite’s decisionmaking. Unlike politicians, however, they can choose to take that risk. They can rock the boat without sinking it completely, because religious leaders are not depending on reelection, are difficult to depose, and their institutions do not fall with their reputation as political parties might. This gives religious leaders a unique edge, and one that Lebanon’s official heads of sects have successfully used as a last resort in defusing sectarian tensions.

Indeed, a striking pattern has emerged in Lebanon: whenever sectarian conflict looms, religious leaders have frequently offset sectarian polarization by siding against the dominant forces and majority opinion within their own communities.

For example, Maronite Patriarch Bishara al-Rai caused stirs in March 2011 and again in May 2016 by staging dialogues with Hezbollah, alienating in the process many of his predecessor's staunchest supporters and allies.⁴⁸ After 2012, the then Sunni grand mufti, Muhammad Rashid Qabbani, was left even more dramatically out in the cold after meeting with Hezbollah representatives and the Iranian ambassador against the will of Saad Hariri's Future Movement, the largest political force in the Sunni community.⁴⁹ Qabbani's Shia counterpart, Abdel-Amir Qabalan, used his Eid al-Adha sermon in October 2013 to call on Hezbollah to surrender its weapons to the state and to stop sending fighters to Syria.⁵⁰ Each of these figures was lambasted for renegeing on his responsibility to his own community, but they clearly regarded the reinforcement of national unity as a preferred means of preserving the higher interests of all communities.

Similar moves were made by predecessors to neutralize the sectarian overtones of conflict during the 1975–1990 civil war, and even earlier crises. Most famously, then Maronite Patriarch Boulos al-Meouchi joined the Muslim majority in opposition to then Maronite president Camille Chamoun to de-escalate an armed crisis in 1958.⁵¹

The primary concern of Lebanon's official religious leaders has long appeared to be prevention of the collapse of the state and its constitutional institutions and to be countering the sectarian dimension of polarization. These attitudes are possible, ultimately, because official religious leaders are not answerable to sectarian constituencies in the same way that politicians are.

How Do Religious Leaders Inhibit Social Integration

Even as religious leaders generally defuse sectarian tensions, they also function as the keepers of social boundaries between sects. The sectarian personal-status courts and school systems that fall under these leaders' legal remit were initially intended to provide for freedom of religion, but they have ended up severely restricting people's freedom to live outside of a confessional framework. In particular, the fact that the religious communities retain control over personal-status issues makes it extremely difficult for many Lebanese to marry outside their sect. Whatever exceptions and loopholes exist, religious institutions lay the tracks for members of their sect to conduct lives surrounded by co-religionists and punctuated by life events—birth, marriage, divorce, death, and inheritance—legally administered by a religious body. Subtly trapped by this pervasive reality, members of sects have their perceptions of society and citizenship shaped accordingly. Potentially, this can reproduce the social basis for sectarianism and create conditions ripe for sectarian mobilization.

These separate personal-status systems are popularly assumed to be relics of a pre-modern era, vestiges left intact as the modern state was built up around them. Lebanese advocates of secularism thus lay the blame at the feet of religious leaders as prime culprits in the preservation of an essentially sectarian society, arguing that civil authorities need to take over from them.

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The truth, however, is quite different. It was, in fact, state recognition and the legislation of sects and their institutions in the twentieth century that led to the codification of personal-status law for legally binding courts in every community.⁵² Various precedents existed in informal adjudication on the basis of customary local practice, but these were very different affairs from the unforgivingly enforced black-and-white rulings of an all-embracing modern legal system. Translating custom into legal code, for instance, meant that divorce became impossible for members of Lebanon's Catholic communities—including Maronites—for the first time, as did mixed marriages for the Druze.⁵³ Such principles could previously have been more easily fudged than they are today by a favorable cleric working in an informal and personalized system, avoided by opting to see an Ottoman judge in the nearest town, or simply ignored. State-driven centralization and rationalization have made many Lebanese sects what they are at present: rigidly circumscribed and clearly differentiated communities whose social lives are governed by monolithic religious hierarchies.

The Dangers in the Empowerment of Religious Leaderships

Lebanon's century-long experiment with religious representation shows us where state policies of confessional recognition lead in the long term. It also serves as a cautionary tale for statesmen considering dealing with religious leaders. When governments choose to recognize such individuals as spokesmen, the long-term consequences for the communities represented in this way can be profound and difficult to foresee.

For all the good intentions of Lebanon's official religious leaders in promoting peaceful coexistence, the empowerment of these institutions has contributed to the demarcation and practical separation of communal groups. Large numbers of Lebanese citizens do not feel properly represented by these religious leaders, who promote, and indeed enforce, their own visions of religious orthodoxy and social propriety.⁵⁴ Whereas Lebanon's confessional political system is designed—at least theoretically—to promote multiparty cooperation, the state has sponsored religious leaders to guarantee the basic interests of their various sects. The Lebanese system attributes primary sectarian identities to a population that does not always wish to be represented in those terms.⁵⁵ Within this restrictive context, popular aspirations have been frustrated by the confessional system's entrenchment of both political and religious elites.

Even among those integrated into the confessional system, official religious institutions have created a sense of marginalization. Take the Sunni community, which has as its religious leader the mufti of the republic. As a Beirut-based institution, the office of the mufti of the republic has always been occupied by the son of one of Beirut's established clerical families, which enjoy privileged access to high-ranking jobs in the city's personal-status courts, mosques, and

religious schools, as well as connections with the political elite.⁵⁶ The mufti can impose his religious and political orthodoxy while claiming to represent all Sunnis on the national stage. This, combined with the consistent failure of Sunni politicians to secure equal state investment in Sunni communities outside Beirut,⁵⁷ explains why many Sunnis in Tripoli, Sidon, and the Beqaa Valley feel disenfranchised. As a result, there are those who have increasingly used Islamist organizations as an alternative means of expressing their religious identity. The monopolistic claims of the central hierarchy have heightened tensions between official and unofficial Sunni representatives, who have sometimes fought for control over local mosques, pushing preachers to conform to very different visions of Islam.

Meanwhile, Sunni secularists, indeed secularists in general, may protest against their religious leaders' power for different reasons but are similarly disenfranchised and even more restricted by the religious representatives' hold over personal-status law. Not only have the religious leaders used their influence to block proposals for an optional civil personal-status code, but the previous Sunni grand mufti, Muhammad Rashid Qabbani, issued a fatwa declaring its proponents apostates.⁵⁸ The mufti's enforcement of a single vision of what it is to be a Sunni Muslim thus marginalizes a range of people in the community, contributing to their resentment of the system as a whole.

When it comes to Lebanon's crisis of representation, the inadequacy of imposing a religious form of representation contributes to widespread political alienation and the rise of activism against the political system and incidences of civil unrest across Lebanon today. The social impact may transcend hot-button political issues but ought to be seen as one of the common underlying causes behind protests by civil society groups in Beirut, Salafi militancy in Tripoli or Sidon, lawlessness in the Beqaa Valley, and dissatisfaction against the state in the northeastern town of Aarsal. State recognition of religious leaders has not improved the representation of diversity in Lebanon but, on the contrary, has served to suppress it.

Conclusion: How the State Has Restructured Religious Life

What remains is an essentially ethical question of whether and how religious leaders belong as representatives of sects. Can their role be a legitimate supplement to democratic representation? That question has acquired a new urgency in recent years, both in Lebanon and beyond. Religion, it seems, has returned to politics with a vengeance, and policymakers around the world are scrambling to address this.

In the West, most countries have long been accustomed to a separation of church and state, and until recently their statesmen and diplomats

communicated mainly with secular elites in other parts of the world, including the Middle East. All of that is now changing. Governments are increasingly concerned with religious communities at home or abroad, especially Muslims, and are looking for new frameworks within which to deal with them. U.S. President Barack Obama, for instance, has held meetings with prominent U.S. Muslims, gave a famous speech to the Islamic world from Cairo in 2009,⁵⁹ and in the same year appointed the first special representative to Muslim communities.

Alongside such efforts at state-community dialogue, a veritable industry of community-to-community dialogue has arisen, with varying degrees of state sponsorship. Examples include the Parliament of the World's Religions, which first met in Chicago in 1893 but has been revived with increasing regularity since 1993,⁶⁰ or the United Nations World Interfaith Harmony Week, held annually

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since 2010. These various initiatives to involve religious communities in formal dialogue or even policymaking all raise core questions of representation. Who can be taken to legitimately represent a given religious community?

Such questions have become particularly acute in the Middle East, where sectarianism is an ever-growing concern. When states are failing to maintain social cohesion—for instance in the new “crescent of state weakness” stretching from Lebanon through Syria to Iraq⁶¹—there

is a temptation for local or foreign policymakers to look to religious leaders as natural interlocutors with key segments of society. So in Lebanon, currently mired in political stalemate and sectarian tensions, religious leaders' opinions are solicited as a supplement to those of elected politicians, whose representativeness is often thought to be compromised by factional interests and corruption.

Policymakers with the best of intentions, seeking to be inclusive of religious diversity as a means of reducing communal tensions, may find themselves contributing to the problem by recognizing particular religious leaders as representatives. That is what has happened in Lebanon. These figures chosen by Lebanese governments (and earlier by French colonial officials) to represent communities have become entrenched, wielding influence with little accountability.

The temptation to pursue such policies is particularly strong because of the immediate value religious leaders offer in countering sectarian radicalization. But should policymakers grant recognition to religious leaders for their short-term value as allies against the escalation of sect-based tensions, when to do so misrepresents society, empowers those it recognizes, marginalizes many others, and in the long term helps create the social conditions for such divisions? Lebanon's experience stands as a cautionary tale for those negotiating the problem of sectarianism elsewhere.

Notes

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6. Kamal Salibi, *A House of Many Mansions: The History of Lebanon Reconsidered* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 144.
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9. See Catholic World News, "Maronite Patriarch Retires; Successor to Be Elected in March," CatholicCulture.org, February 28, 2011, <http://www.catholicculture.org/news/headlines/index.cfm?storyid=9423>. See also Antoine Saad, *The Seventy-Sixth: His Beatitude Mar Nasrallah Boutros Cardinal Sfeir, Maronite Patriarch of Antioch and the Entire East*, trans. N. S. Nasr, vol. 1, 1986–1992 (Beirut: Entire East, 2005).
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