LILIT HARUTYUNYAN[*]
DOI: 10.52837/2579-2970-2023.12.1-6

SUNNI AND SHIA COMMUNITIES' TRANSFORMATIONS IN LEBANON: CHANGES IN THE BALANCE OF POWER[*]

Abstract: *The paper focuses on the transformations going on in Sunni and Shia communities in Lebanon within the framework of the current changes in the regional balance of power. The analysis of the transformations of the mentioned communities in Lebanon and of their impact on the internal and external levels provides one of the most relevant examples of the "sectarianization" of the Middle East, especially after 2011, which was also characterized by the struggle between Sunnis and Shiites. The confessional contradictions are deeply rooted in Lebanon, based on its confessional political system, but, despite the public rhetoric, both communities tend to have more pragmatic and accommodating attitudes instead of deepening confessional confrontations. While it is true that each community has witnessed the radicalization of certain positions and that, especially after 2011, major changes are taking place, which have been fuelled by the narrative that is mostly emerging at the regional level. Have regional developments influenced the national Lebanese ones? Has confessionalism been used as a tool of realpolitik in Lebanon? These are the main questions that are going to be examined.*

Keywords: *Lebanon, Sunni, Shia, Confessional system, Balance of Power, Transformations, Arab uprisings ("Arab spring").*

Introduction

The wave of Arab uprisings (known also as the "Arab Spring") that shook the region and led to the 'collapse' of some longtime authoritarian leaders has provided

[*] Leading research fellow at Institute of Oriental Studies, NAS RA (IOS). Lecturer at Yerevan State University (YSU) and at International Scientific-Educational Center of the National Academy of Sciences of Republic of Armenia (ISEC). lilit.harutyunyan@ysu.am
[*] Received May 1
Reviewed May 31
Accepted June 6

new stimulus to the interpretation of developments in the Middle Eastern region, until now viewed through the paradigm of authoritarianism resilience (Heydemann and Leenders, 2011; Harutyunyan, 2022; Volpi, 2012). The "Arab Spring" paved the way for a series of new interpretations and transformations of the regional balance of power.

Before 2011, one of the best-known theories emphasized the existence of an internal split in the Middle East following the division between Sunnis and Shiites, with a focus on the identity element (Cole, 2006; Helfont, 2009). Several scholars have advanced the hypothesis of a “post-Arab” Middle East (Phillips, 2014), with most relations among Middle Eastern States, instead of inter-Arab relations, increasingly dependent on those of non-Arab States (Iran, Turkey, Israel) (Susser, 2007; Noble, 2008). Another field of analysis had underlined the reconstitution of renewed pan-Arabism based on new transnational consciousness fuelled by new Arab media (El-Nawawy and Iskander, 2002; Lamloum, 2009). Another group of scholars, such as Valbjørn and Bank (2012), used patterns of analysis borrowed from the past, such as that of the "Arab Cold War", amending them to reflect the region’s new situation following the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq. Their argument, using Malcolm Kerr’s 1965 book The Arab Cold War, 1958–1964 as a starting point, would seek to employ the prism of the realist interpretation proposed by Kerr, rearranging it for the current situation. Valbjørn and Bank argue that dynamics among the Arab states would be characterized by a new dimension of Arab unity not at the state level but at the society level (Valbjørn and Bank, 2007). They argue that, despite appearances, Middle Eastern policy today would not be confessional or ethnic divisions that would prevail, such as the supposed growing rivalry between Sunnis and Shiites, but dynamics more closely related to the classical raison d’état that would fit into a "Westphalian narrative", whereby the particular interests of the states would win out. In Valbjørn and Bank’s point of view, an interesting example of such dynamics could be seen in the behavior of certain Arab countries during the war between Hizballah and Israel in 2006. According to the researchers mentioned above, the deployment of Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Egypt against Hizballah's actions would not be dictated, as

many analysts argue, by a Sunni-Shia divide but by the start of what Valbjørn and Bank define as a "new Arab cold war", that is, a realignment of Middle Eastern states on the basis of a renewed struggle for leadership in the region. According to this view, in reconfiguring the regional order in the wake of the "Arab Spring,", the relations that are being formed among the various Middle Eastern countries appear to be characterized by a form of competition in which each nation vies for their accreditation as a hegemonic power at the regional level (Salloukh, 2013). If the narrative of identity is heavily used to represent the Middle Eastern region as characterized by a redefinition of alliances that would see a Sunni bloc (Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Qatar) lined up against the so-called "axis of resistance", in part coinciding with a Shia bloc (Iran, Syria, Hizballah and Hamas) (Abdo, 2013, Heydemann, 2013, Malmvig, 2013), the so-called "confessionalisation" of the Middle East should be considered the new all-encompassing narrative that is replacing transnational unifying themes (such as the Palestinian cause and the fight against Israel or pan-Arabism and pan-Islamism) by proposing a sort of new pan-Islamism based on confessional basis. In the following paper, we would like to show that national politics still play an important role in redefining the geopolitical balance of power in the region.

In the context of Arab uprisings and regional transformations, we can find that the political strategies of the regional states have acquired international recognition, which has also been accompanied by the decline of the interests of the Western countries in the Middle East, as the American withdrawal from Iraq (and recently from Afghanistan) has demonstrated, and also by the marginalization of those transnational issues (such as the Arab-Israeli conflict), which have contributed towards fueling the transnational pan-Arabist ideology (Norton, 2013). This element also appears to have been strengthened, despite appearances, by the insignificant and weak role played by the Arab League and other organizations (also the GCC) in regional politics (Dakhlallah, 2012).

The paper aims to focus on the transformation of the communitarian arrangements in Lebanon, one of the countries that has not been directly affected by

the “Arab Spring”. The focus will be on the Lebanese Sunni and Shia communities, as the split between Sunnis and Shiites has become one of the most complicated narratives used to describe the current situation at the regional level. Consequently, the article will explore how this narrative is fuelled in Lebanon and how important this is in understanding the regional dynamic. The Sunni community, represented by the coalition government of March 14[2], is suffering a process of marginalization that has led, on the one hand, to the marginalization of its leader Saad Hariri and, on the other hand, to the strengthening of some Salafist movements, which put forward a binary vision interpreting Lebanese politics as a struggle between Sunnis and Shiites. The Shia community, whose role (with the rise of Hizballah) has become increasingly strategic, is suffering legitimacy turmoil after the escalation of the crisis in Syria and the support provided by the General Secretary of the Party, Hasan Nasrallah, to the president of Syria, Bashar Asad. This threatened to undermine the party's claim to trans-confessionalism, which it has aspired to since its creation.

However, it should be remembered that in different periods, this 'confessional tension' partly aimed to preserve the consociational (confessional) system. The system foresees proportional repartition of power among the different communities (Hiro, 2003; Lijparth, 1969). In Lebanon, the president of the Republic has to be a Maronite, the prime minister a Sunni, and the president of the Parliament a Shiite. The Sunni anti-Shia rhetoric (spread also within the Maronite community) is likely to move the plane of comparison among the different communities, thereby giving credit to the narrative of sectarianism that has been amplified by the media[3]. The following

[2] The anti-Syrian opposition formed the 14 March coalition, named after the rally staged on that day in 2005, gathered around the al-Mustaqbal (the Future) party, which included the Sunni forces but also those of the Christian Lebanese Forces of Samir Geagea and the Druze Progressive Socialist Party of Walid Jumblaṭ, who left the coalition in 2011 (Harutyunyan, 2020).

[3]The Rise of the Salafis in Lebanon: A New Sunni-Shiite Battlefield, Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, Vol. 12, No. 28, 4 December 2012, http://goo.gl/FKqxSm. (Accessed May 1, 2023); Alexander Corbeil, Lebanon’s Salafists Challenge Hezbollah Dominance, November 11th, 2012, Foreign Policy Association, http://goo.gl/vchM3z/ (Accessed May 1, 2023); Lebanese Salafists call for jihad in Syria, April 22, 2013, The Middle East Time http://goo.gl/DqNlM3. (Accessed May 1, 2023); Hezbollah entry in Syrian conflict fans

reading of Lebanese politics seems to create new and less manageable confessional tensions, and it is clear that these adverse changes are a clear legacy of the "sectarian pan-Islamist" narrative (Di Peri, 2014a) that is emerging at the regional level. It should be mentioned that "sectarian tension" could be also considered the reason why Lebanon seems to be immune to the wave of uprisings.

Lebanese confessionalism and the Arab uprisings

Lebanon is one of the most interesting countries to observe as regards the narrative of the interactions between Sunnis and Shiites. This small country is a "mirror" of the confessional diversity that characterizes the region. In Lebanon, however, the division of political power along sectarian lines has granted certain stability to the system due to the power-sharing formula (Fakhoury, 2009; Di Peri, 2010). If Lebanon's economic system espoused a neoliberal vision, also as a result of a laissez-faire policy developed post-independence (Gates, 1998), in Syria as well as in Iraq, economic power has long since been established by a centralized economic policy (Aita, 2007; al-Ahsan, 1984); only in recent times has centralization been leading the way to the privatization of certain sectors. Finally, while Lebanon has played a key yet indirect role in Middle Eastern and international relations, at different stages, Syria and Iraq have sought to gain a hegemonic role as regional powers, contending with Egypt (or Saudi Arabia) while also playing the pan-Arabism card (Gause, 2007).

The different trajectory that Lebanon has experienced over the years compared to other countries in the region characterized by confessionalism led to the fact that communities played an important role in the building of the nation-state in Lebanon, becoming the mainstay of the country's political and administrative management (Rondot, 1947). However, since the end of the second civil war (1975–1990) and more distinctly after the war with Israel in 2006, a series of important changes within each community began to emerge, showing at least two elements: 1. Now as in the

Shiite-Sunni fires, The Times of Israel, June 8, 2013, http://goo.gl/CxzoeR (Accessed May 1, 2023), etc.

past, the Lebanese communities are not immune to external influences and actors, yet they operate in a regional context strongly permeated by instability, and in this context, there is a mutual exchange between internal and external in terms of alliances and patronage links. 2. Despite the obvious confessional splits, the Lebanese communities demonstrate a certain pragmatism that affects both the alliances within the country and those that each community develops externally. In the paper, these two points will be examined through an analysis of the Shiite and Sunni communities. These aspects are going to be observed in relation to the national Lebanese context and their transnational dimension.

The Rise of Hizballah and the Lebanese Shia community transition

The rise and consolidation of the Shia community and the arrival on the Lebanese political scene of Hizballah in 1982 have greatly contributed to changing the confessional balance, having a major impact both internally and externally. Since the 1970s, the Lebanese Shia community has undoubtedly received more attention from scholars and the media. In the 1970s, the Shia community became the most populous Muslim community in Lebanon. Internally, this clearly contributes to a more demanding role for the Shiites in the confessional political system, whereas externally, it contributes to redefining strategic alliances. If the Shia community in Lebanon was the "great" excluded from the National Pact of 1943—and especially from the new configuration of institutional arrangements provided for by the al-Taif agreement of 1989—the end of the civil war certainly marked an important step forward for the internal accreditation of this community. In the 1970s and then the 1980s, the main actor for the Shia community was the Amal movement. The official creation of Hizballah (1982) contributed greatly to the resizing of Amal, paving the way for its rapid affirmation as one of the most important political actors in the Lebanese political arena (Abukhalil, 1990).

More than the other parties in Lebanon, the "Party of God" (Hizballah) was more able to adapt to the profound changes in Lebanese society after the second civil war (Alagha, 2006; Hamzeh, 1993). On the one hand, Hizballah provided a voice for the

dispossessed, carrying on the legacy of Musa al-Sadr and building a welfare network for the poor (as well as for martyrs' families) that will endow it with legitimacy nationwide (Flanigan, 2009). On the other hand, over the years and especially in the 2000s, Hizballah was able to attract, centered around a pan-Arab project, namely the common struggle of the Arabs against the State of Israel, a number of countries and movements in the region (for example, Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood) (Schenker, 2013). The flexibility of Hizballah has been particularly evident since 1992, when, after some hesitation and strong internal discussions, it finally accepted the al-Ṭaif agreement and made the decision to run in the political elections, winning an increasing number of parliamentary seats. The gradual modification of the strategy of the party at the domestic level and its unerring commitment to building the "society of resistance" did not prevent Hizballah from maintaining a strongly militant external stance, establishing the party's inclusion on terrorist organization lists as well as international stigmatization, both in the U.S. in 2013 and in Europe, as well as in Israel (Azani, 2006; Birnbaum and Eglash, 2013). This position, marked by the struggle against the West and Israel, was clearly apparent from the beginning, as evidenced by the party's program document, the Open Letter of 1985[4].

It is obvious that this basis has also been seen by the two countries that have contributed the most to the emergence and development of Hizballah - Iran and Syria. It should be noted, however, that, in spite of the rhetoric, Syrian support for the Lebanese Shiites groups did not fit within a regional policy characterized by the Sunni-Shia divide but rather by a more pragmatic attitude, that is, the identification of the most promising community in Lebanon for its accreditation as one of the main actors at the regional level (Di Peri, 2014b).

From the point of view of Hizballah, if, over the years, pragmatism has prevailed at the domestic level, a more militant attitude has emerged at the regional level, which, until the outbreak of the Arab revolts, relied on two important elements: the claim to credit itself as a pan-Arab organization open to all communities and representative of the 'ummah' and the ability to leverage this militant position to

[4] The text of the Open Letter see Norton (1987), pp. 167-87.

justify the party's domestic policy choices as well as seeking to placate the Shiite hard core and the transconfessional alliances, such as the alliance with Maronite leader General Michel Aoun. This double track and the ability of Hizballah to introduce and establish itself as a new force on the Lebanese political scene (Lamloum, 2009; Koch, 2008) have in some way contributed towards dampening the critical elements from within, from the Sunni community (in particular Saad Harir, son of ex-prime minister Rafik Hariri, especially after the assassination of Rafik Hariri and the creation of the International Commission of Inquiry) (Khashan, 2011), and from the Maronite community (especially beginning with the 33-day war of 2006). Despite the so-called "divine victory" against the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), Hizballah began to be criticized domestically for being responsible for the war and the consequent destruction of the country, as well as internationally, for its dependence on Syria and Iran, which would have used Lebanon as a proxy to conduct their struggles against Israel (Gambill and Abdelnour, 2002). The accreditation as a leader of the fight against Zionism, neo-liberalism, and capitalist exploitation, as well as participation in anti-globalization conferences (Karagiannis, 2009), and the good management skills acquired at the administrative level (Harb, 2009), enabled the party to accumulate political capital that could be exploited within Lebanon. However, after the war of 2006 and the events of the spring of 2008, a new perception of Hizballah was established, which had, as a common matrix, growing hostility towards it by a large part of the population as well as polarization of the confessional positions. In May 2008, the decision taken by the Fouad Siniora government to authorize an investigation into Hizballah's phone network, resulting in the removal of the head of security at Beirut International Airport (a man close to Hizballah), led to a violent reaction by Hizballah. For the first time since the end of the civil war, the country was shaken by two weeks of armed clashes between Hizballah and the Lebanese army, which only came to an end through foreign diplomatic efforts.

Even the long-standing alliance with Maronite leader Michel Aoun couldn't help Hizballah regain credibility at a national level. It can therefore be affirmed that Hizballah's adaptability and its ability to use the international and regional context for

its domestic accreditation have been questioned to such an extent that, in 2009, Hizballah published its new manifesto, a document explaining its new stance at the domestic, regional, and international levels (Di Peri, 2014b). It can be maintained that this new document is also an attempt to show the party's moderate politics and to regain credibility at the domestic level. Actually, in the manifesto, some harsh stances contained in the Open Letter disappear and a more pragmatic attitude prevails (Alagha, 2011).

The crisis in Syria and its consequences for Lebanon are reinforcing Hizballah's inability to continue to juggle the two positions (moderation domestically and militarization externally) for two main reasons: firstly, because the older external supporters of Hizballah – Iran and Syria, are strongly challenged by the international community.

Syria does not seem credible given the annihilation policy of a large part of its population. Iran, which had hailed and supported the Arab uprisings as a continuation of the 1979 Islamic Revolution to promote itself as a regional superpower, has objective difficulties in sustaining its position considering the current situation marked by increasing tension between Sunnis and Shiites. Secondly, given Hizballah's unconditional support of Asad, the "Party of God's" strategy of acting as a representative for all Lebanese is gradually crumbling, consequently increasing the anti-Shiite rhetoric in Lebanon within the Sunni and Christian communities and causing further confessional splits with tangible consequences on the ground (clashes in Tripoli and Saida).

It should be argued, however, that the official declarations by Hizballah on these issues continue to focus on the moderation of positions at the domestic level (Lakkis, 2013).

The Evolution of the Lebanese Sunni Community in the context of regional transformations

The Sunni community has played an important role in the country since the creation of Greater Lebanon in 1920 (Di Peri, 2009). The political and demographic

weight of the Sunni community began to grow along with the leverage of the Christian Maronite community. Each community had its own vision of Lebanon. The Maronites would have frowned upon the creation of a Maronite state in Lebanon; in the 1926 Constitution, this prerogative was omitted, promoting instead the narrative of a future state for all Lebanese regardless of confessional affiliation (Zamir, 1985). While the Sunnis would have preferred Lebanon to have been part of a wider pan-Arab project, perhaps assuming its union with Syria (at the end of the 1950s also with Egypt and Syria). At the forefront of such thinking were the Sunni elite in Beirut, represented by the emblematic figure of Riyad al-Solh[5]. Gradual accommodation and, above all, the prospect of political and economic benefits for both sides led to the creation, in 1943, of the National Pact, an unwritten accord that guaranteed a power-sharing agreement between the two major communities, Maronite and Sunni, on the basis of their confessional weight. The Sunni community had great significance not only in the institutional arrangements that led to the creation of the Lebanese consociational system but also in the political life of the country, as evidenced by the considerable power of certain Sunni prime ministers during the period of 1943–1975.

After the end of the civil war in 1990, a new founding pact, the al-Ṭaif agreement, further legitimized the importance of the Sunni community through its equivalence to the Maronite community at the expense of the Shiites. The preeminence of the Sunni community, even after political marginalization, over the Maronite one in the aftermath of the civil war had as a witness in the re-foundation of its own narrative a controversial and charismatic figure who had played a key role in the reconstruction of the country, ex-prime minister Rafik Hariri. A native of Saida (Sidon) city in southern Lebanon, historically a Sunni stronghold, Hariri was a leading actor in Lebanese politics of the nineties and helped to strengthen the idea of

[5] Riyad al-Solh was one of the most prominent Sunni Lebanese political men and a promoter of Lebanese independence and the National Pact.

a “lay” Sunnism with a strong entrepreneurial mindset[6]. Hariri’s idea of Sunnism, linked with modernity and progress, used the same buzzwords that Hariri had used to present his pharaonic projects for the reconstruction of the country through his company, SOLIDERE (Makarem, 2014). The presentation of himself as the new man of Lebanon gave new visibility to the Sunni community, which found in Hariri a powerful, unifying leader. The Lebanese system, which is based on the consociational model whereby the balance of all the components of society is fundamental, has been shaken since the Nineties by two important trends: the increasingly open clash among the three powers of the state, which, post-al-Taif, had been treated de facto as the same (the president of the Republic, the prime minister, and the speaker of the parliament). This clash led to paralysis in decision-making. The other aspect was the increasingly evident conflict between Hariri and Hizballah, which had become the country’s leading political force. Furthermore, these fractures must be contextualized in the light of the so-called "pax Syriana" in Lebanon (Kassir, 2000). From the end of the civil war until the withdrawal of its troops from Lebanese territory in 2005, Syria played a leading role in driving Lebanese politics. The institutional clash between Hariri and President Lahud, avowedly pro-Syrian, and between Hariri and Hizballah, openly supported by Syria, was consumed in the shadow of the Syrian aegis over Lebanon. While taking into account these dynamics, attention must also be paid to the events following the assassination of Rafik Hariri in February 2005. A wave of outrage at the murder of the former Prime Minister, for which Syria and its ally Hizballah were accused, led to a polarization of the political positions within the confessional system, which resulted in a radicalization of the conflict between the Sunni political parties aggregated around the March 14 coalition and Hizballah with its March 8 coalition, in particular on two controversial issues: the disarmament of Hizballah (as required by the al-Taif agreement and never accomplished) and the initial investigation into the assassination of Rafik Hariri. Two political coalitions came to light in the aftermath

[6] Hariri was prime minister from 1992 to 1998 and from 2000 to 2004. His politics have been defined as authoritarian modernization. Hariri had strong ties with Saudi Arabia; a country where he lived for many years before coming back to Lebanon (Harutyunyan, 2020).

of Hariri's assassination. The March 8 coalition brought together the Shia movements Hizballah and Amal and the predominantly Christian supporters of Michel Aoun (who had opposed Syrian influence in Lebanon during the 1990s). For the first time in its history, the Sunni community felt orphaned, abandoned, and marginalized by its politicians, who were murdered[7] and their political weight gradually decreased. This perception is an important factor to take into account.

This is also the reason why the Sunni community has strengthened itself around the Sunni al-Mustaqbal party, led after the death of Rafiq Hariri by his son and successor Saad (Vloeberghs, 2012).

The polarization of the positions of the political forces regarding Hariri's murder investigation saw the option put forward by the March 14 coalition, which called for an international resolution, opposed to Hizballah's alternative, which called for the settlement of the dispute "within" the country. The Security Council Resolution 1595 of 2005 had resulted in the creation of an International Commission of Inquiry (Cataleta, 2012; Schimmelpfennig, Gardner, 2008), whose work (which led to the arrest of some members of the Syrian intelligence) was interrupted by the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 2006. It was within this context that, on May 30, 2007, with Resolution 1757 of the Security Council, the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL) was set up, becoming operational in 2009. The beginning of the STL's work was preceded by the "2008 events," which were caused by several factors: the clash between the two coalitions around the STL as well as their different stances regarding the Israeli invasion, which led, in November 2006, to the resignation of the Shiite ministers from the Fouad Siniora government; the end of the term of President Emile Lahud, already renewed by special law in 2004, which led to an eighteen-month power vacuum; and the clashes in the Palestinian refugee camp of Nahr al-Bared[8].

[7] In 2005, besides Hariri, there were a series of assassinations of anti-Syrian politicians and journalists.

[8] The Fatah al-Islam movement, led by Shaker al-Abssi, with its basis in the Palestinian refugee camp of Nahr al-Bared on the outskirts of Tripoli, was severely attacked by the Lebanese army under the pretext of pursuing an officer responsible for a bank robbery in

After exhausting mediation, promoted from the outside, the parties were able to find a semblance of unity on a new confessional compromise, the Doha Agreement (May 21, 2008). The compromise unlocked the impasse that had lasted for months, leading to the election of Michel Suleiman as President of Lebanon on May 23, a revision of the electoral law (passed in September), and the launch of a new political economy[9].

However, following allegations by the STL leveled at Hizballah, considered one of the masterminds of the assassination of Hariri, at the beginning of 2011, the political tension that had been kept painstakingly under control in previous years became evident once more, and Hizballah withdrew eleven of its ministers from Saad Hariri's government, causing it to fall. The appointment of Najib Mikati, a Sunni businessman originally from Tripoli, as Prime Minister did not appease the controversy since his candidacy was put forward by Hizballah and its allies, Michel Aoun and Walid Jumblaṭ. Protests erupted across the country on the "day of rage" (January 25, 2011)[10]. After five months of negotiations, on 13 June 2011, Mikati became the Prime Minister of Lebanon. These events reinforced a sense of alienation and powerlessness within the Sunni community, which played an important role in allowing the growth of radical Sunni movements with a strong anti-Hizballah stance and, in general, an anti- Shiite rhetoric.

The political difficulties of the March 14 coalition led by Saad Hariri, in particular due to the lack of a clear political strategy, encouraged the party to seek the support of Sunni conservative groups with varying degrees of radicalism, which might prove a useful tool to revive the coalition's basis (Fielder, 2007). In this

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Tripoli. After months of siege, affiliates of the group were dispersed, and al-Abssi disappeared. Later, he was killed by Syrian security forces.

[9] It is also important to see the memorandum of understanding signed the same year between Hizballah and the Lebanese Salafi movement led by Sheikh Dr. Hassan al-Shahhal to promote a renewed agreement between the Lebanese Islamist forces to guarantee national unity. This memorandum, however, was suspended indefinitely from al-Shahhal, the day after his signature. The Hezbollah-Salafist memorandum of understanding 19 August 2008, https://www.peaceagreements.org/viewmasterdocument/2432 (accessed 1 May, 2023).

[10] Lebanon protests turn violent, Al Jazeera, January 25, 2011, http://goo.gl/60h5Jy. (Accessed May 1, 2023).

context, one of the elements that necessitates emphasis is the high fragmentation that the Sunni community was forced to face in the last decade: while many Sunnis support the March 14 coalition, others have "migrated" to Hizballah (the "leader" of resistance against Israel), and others have joined radical Islamic groups with a clear anti-system, and often anti-Shiite, attitude.

The problems within the Lebanese Sunni community were amplified at the regional level. Since Rafik Hariri's commitment to Lebanese politics, ties between the Sunni community and Saudi Arabia have become very close. In general, Lebanese Sunnis have espoused a neoliberal economic policy that has brought them closer to the West[11]. The political and economic woes of the Hariri family after Rafik Hariri's assassination irritated Riyadh, however, and the turbulent regional context that emerged from the Arab uprisings of 2011 merely distorted the attention of the Saudi monarchy from the Hariri family.

However, it should be mentioned that during his mandate, Saad Hariri tried to maintain a pragmatic approach with his regional neighbors, for example, with a visit to Damascus in late December 2009 and through his marriage to a woman from a prestigious Syrian family[12]. Saad Hariri's visit to Damascus was after the Saudi ambassador's visit, who affirmed that "the steady communication and special relationship between the custodian of the holy shrines and President Assad are exemplary for other Arab leaders to emulate" (Khashan, 2011).

It seems apparent that the changed internal circumstances, with the massive influx of Syrian refugees, especially Sunnis, the manifest support of the Sunni community to the forces of opposition to Syrian president Asad and to some radical Salafi groups in Lebanon, and the lack of political figures gathering the lost legacy of the Hariri clan, are exacerbating the problems within the Sunni community and fragmenting them further (Di Peri, 2014b).

[11] Given the economic and political problems of the Hariri family, Saudi Arabia has become increasingly crucial over the years despite the good relations of Saad Hariri with the French president Sarkozy.

[12] "Hariri ends trip calling for better relations with Syria", France 24, 20 December 2009, https://www.france24.com/en/20091220-hariri-ends-trip-calling-better-relations-with-syria (accessed 1 May, 2023).

Conclusion

It is evident that in Lebanon, the Sunni and Shia communities are playing a key role in the evolution of national policy, transformations, and changes in the balance of power among Lebanese communities. Given the marginalization of the Christian communities and especially of the Maronites in the aftermath of the al-Taif agreement, Muslim communities have acquired a central role in conducting the political game in the country: the Shiites, mainly through Hizballah, which has been able to gain accreditation at a national and regional level; the Sunnis, because of their historical role in the confessional system of Lebanon; and, more recently, due to the success of the Hariri family. It is also evident that the two communities are strongly projecting outward in defining their own political strategies. On the one hand, by strengthening old alliances, like the involvement of Hizballah in Syria alongside the Asad regime (Devore, 2012). On the other hand, the new connections established with Sunni movements and parties in the Middle East, which called for a revival of the most radical Sunni groups in Lebanon, helped to strengthen a Sunni axis that is spreading increasingly to a regional level (Omayma, 2008). The Salafist groups that have strengthened their positions in Tripoli, as well as those that have developed around Ahmad al-Assir in Saida, are examples of a shift in this direction.

These changes within the communities aren't new in Lebanon. Although the confessional clashes have been historically represented as a fight between Christians and Muslims, and the civil war has helped fuel this narrative, it should not be forgotten that, towards the final stages of the civil war, bloody clashes exploded between Sunnis and Shiites, inside the Shia community, in the "war of the camps" (Picard, 1993; Harutyunyan, 2007), which led to Iran's intervention with sanctions against their co-religionists. It should also be pointed out that the presence of Salafist groups in Lebanon cannot be linked solely to the Syrian crisis (Hamzeh, 1997).

However, it is obvious that the intervention of regional actors with renewed political weight, such as Saudi Arabia, Qaṭar, and the Muslim Brotherhood, has led to the radicalization of certain positions, pushing the narrative of sectarianism and its diffusion at a Lebanese level (Norton, 2012). Saudi Arabia and Iran seem to be

framed within the precise dynamics of realpolitik for the control of the region, in which confessional issues are used as the main tool of this realpolitik (Gause, 2011; Rivetti, 2014).

Analysis of the main transformations that have occurred within the Shia and Sunni communities in Lebanon has demonstrated that the country has been strongly affected by the evolution of regional relations. It cannot be denied that certain polarizations of confessional positions on a sectarian basis are a reflection of the larger polarization of these positions on a regional level. Lebanese politics is still alive, and, until now, as part of the Baabda Declaration of 2012 (which stressed the need for the neutralization of Lebanon regarding the Syrian war and regional events[13]), the Lebanese political forces have tried to preserve Lebanon from the regional turmoil. However, until now, the policy of non-confrontation, based upon confessionalism, has prevailed, not without difficulties, over the narrative of "confessional pan-Islamism" that is increasingly circulating nowadays in the Middle East, including Lebanon.

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