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Enemy Brothers:
Conflict, Cooperation, and Communal Dynamics within Lebanon

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Introduction

The political, economic, and social grievances of the Arab revolutions converged on Syria in early 2011 with the emergence of relatively limited demonstrations in demand of political reform. While originally small in scale, these protests grew quickly, spurred by President Bashar al-Assad's intransigence, and encouraged by the collapse of dictatorships in Tunisia, Libya, Yemen, and Egypt. As the Assad regime responded with increasing belligerence and brutal repression, the opposition evolved into armed rebellion, and began to call for his overthrow. By mid-2012, the conflict had escalated from a low-level counterinsurgency to all-out civil war.

As of May 2013, the Assad regime and the opposition are entrenched in a bloody, protracted war, which none of the parties seem willing to compromise on. As the death toll rose at the beginning of the crisis, the vast majority of Western and Arab states condemned the government crackdown and sanctioned the Assad regime. Now, with reports estimating the number killed at 70,000 and rising, most governments have declared the Assad regime illegitimate and demanded that he step down. A Pew Research Center survey conducted in March and April 2013 revealed that Assad was also unpopular at the public level in the region:

Syria's Assad Widely Unpopular

	Favorable	Unfavorable	DK
	%	%	%
Israel	7	91	2
Jordan	8	90	2
Palest. ter.	8	87	4
Tunisia	9	81	10
Egypt	11	81	8
Turkey	8	72	20
Lebanon	40	59	1
<i>Christian</i>	36	63	1
<i>Shia</i>	91	8	1
<i>Sunni</i>	7	92	1

PEW RESEARCH CENTER Q40d.

1

Lebanon is one of few states that have not actively called for Assad's departure. This comes despite a 29-year Syrian security and military presence in Lebanon, which only officially ended in 2005 after the fallout over Prime Minister Rafik Hariri's assassination. Instead, the Lebanese government has adopted a policy of "disassociation" and chosen to abstain from most United Nations and Arab League votes related to the Syrian conflict. At the public level, a 2012 Pew Research Center poll demonstrated that only 53 percent of Lebanese thought Assad should step down, compared to nearly 90 percent in Jordan, Egypt, and Tunisia:

¹ Pew Research Center, "Widespread Middle East Fears that Syrian Violence Will Spread," May 1, 2013, <http://www.pewglobal.org/2013/05/01/widespread-middle-east-fears-that-syrian-violence-will-spread/>.

Most Say Assad Should Step Down

	Yes, step down	No, should not step down	DK
	%	%	%
Jordan	89	9	2
Egypt	89	10	1
Tunisia	88	7	5
Turkey	67	14	19
Lebanon	53	44	2
<i>Christian</i>	67	28	5
<i>Sunni</i>	80	20	1
<i>Shia</i>	3	97	0

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Similarly, the reactions of Lebanon's leading political factions have fallen along a wide spectrum of support or opposition to the Assad regime. Generally, Lebanon's political parties have aligned into two major camps; the March 8 and March 14 coalitions. The pro-Syrian March 8 coalition, led by the Shia groups Hezbollah and Amal, and Michel Aoun's Christian Free Patriotic Movement (also referred to as *Aounists*), continues to support President Assad to varying degrees. Meanwhile, the anti-Syria March 14 coalition, led by the mainly Sunni Future Movement, and the Christian Lebanese Forces and Kata'eb parties, has denounced Assad's regime and declared its support for the opposition. Other factions, most notably the Progressive Socialist Party, have taken a more ambiguous stance on the conflict

This paper seeks to explain the behavior of Lebanon's leading political factions in response to the Syrian conflict. It does so through an analysis of Lebanon's history and political framework, and by assessing the international factors which guide the behavior of each faction

² Pew Research Center, "Widespread Condemnation for Assad in Neighboring Countries," June 21, 2012, <http://www.pewglobal.org/2012/06/21/widespread-condemnation-for-assad-in-neighboring-countries/>

independently, and ultimately the Lebanese state as a whole. To accomplish this goal, the authors conducted extensive research on Lebanon's history, its foreign policy, particularly in regards to Lebanese-Syrian relations, and examined a variety of academic and journalistic sources. To supplement this secondary research, the authors also conducted more than a dozen interviews with current Lebanese politicians and advisors, academics, journalists, and other analysts and observers of Lebanon in Beirut and Washington, DC.

This paper contends that the response of each of Lebanon's leading political factions to the Syrian conflict is best explained by their rational self-interest in the domestic political sphere. For Hezbollah, this entails publicly backing Assad and even supporting him militarily in an effort to avoid losing a major source of political support within Lebanon. Amal has sought to mediate between the Assad regime in Syria and its opponents in Lebanon, in hopes of decreasing hostilities and easing the heightened Sunni-Shia divide. By doing so, the party hopes to ensure it can survive and remain politically relevant whatever the fate of the Assad regime. For the Free Patriotic Movement, support of the Assad regime is best understood as a strategic decision to stay relevant in Lebanon's chaotic political climate. The Progressive Socialist Party has been publicly critical of Assad, but has remained officially non-committal in an attempt to protect its small Druze constituency from potential conflict in Lebanon. The Kata'eb Party has advocated for a response of 'positive neutrality,' expressing concern over potential blowback from getting involved in the conflict. The Lebanese Forces has been highly critical of the Assad regime and supportive of the opposition in hopes they will be able to capitalize politically within Lebanon if freed of Assad's meddling. Finally, the Future Movement, which was born out of opposition to the Assad regime, perceives the conflict as an opportunity to finally consolidate power in Lebanon while marginalizing its chief rival, Hezbollah.

This paper proceeds with an overview of Lebanese political history that describes Lebanon's origins, its complex demographic makeup and governmental system, and series of sometimes violent crises. It then discusses the country's international relations, paying particular attention to Lebanese-Syrian dynamics. Within this framework, it moves on to summarize the Syrian conflict and the global, regional, and Lebanese reactions to it. Then, the paper describes how each of Lebanon's seven most prominent political factions have reacted to the Syrian conflict, analyzing the motivations for those reactions. The paper concludes with some broader observations, identifying implications, potential outcomes, policy recommendations, and suggested areas of future study. Lebanon has eighteen officially recognized political factions. The seven factions addressed in this paper were selected because they comprise Lebanon's most dominant political factions, and have played major roles in Lebanon's history. They are also the only parties in Lebanon's parliament with control of at least five seats; and collectively, they account for 90 of Lebanon's 128 parliamentary seats, or 70 percent of parliament.

Overview of Lebanese Political History

Analyzing the responses of Lebanon's leading political factions to the Syrian crisis is impossible without context. Specifically, one needs to be aware of Lebanon's history, unique political structure, how it has responded to prior crises, and its international relations—particularly its relationship with Syria. This section focuses predominantly on the first three items, while the following section unpacks how Lebanon and its political factions have generally engaged, and been subjected to the meddling of, external forces.

The history of modern Lebanon begins in the late 16th century with the establishment of Mount Lebanon as a semi-autonomous emirate of the Ottoman Empire.³ Until the mid-1800s, Mount Lebanon's politics were dominated by competition between Maronite Christians and Druze for supremacy of the mountain. The emirate began to fracture in the 1830s when Lebanese Christians and Druze, employed on opposing sides in an Egyptian-Ottoman conflict, fought each along sectarian lines for the first time.⁴ The following decades saw a complicated series of overlapping conflicts that culminated in 1860 with a civil war that saw both sides cleansing the mixed towns they controlled and even several massacres of Christians.⁵ The violence suffered by the Christians led France to deploy troops to the area, and with the assistance of the British and Russians, force the Ottoman Empire to give Mount Lebanon increased autonomy.⁶ The Christians, despite military defeat, now enjoyed both numerical and political supremacy, and a socio-economic gap favoring them began to widen. From this point forward, the Druze would struggle to survive as a minority in Lebanon.⁷

In the aftermath of World War I, France secured a mandate over what is today Lebanon and Syria.⁸ In 1920, it made the controversial decision to create "Greater Lebanon," annexing the predominantly Muslim territory on every side of Mount Lebanon, more than doubling the entity's size and population. The majority of the population did not approve of the mandate or its borders. Most Muslims and some Christians preferred independence or at least to remain as part of Syria, while other Christians were concerned about the significant reduction of their

³ Fawwaz Traboulsi, *A History of Modern Lebanon* (London and Ann Arbor: Pluto Press, 2007), 3.

⁴ Ussama Makdisi, *The Culture of Sectarianism: Community, History, and Violence in Nineteenth-Century Ottoman Lebanon* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 55-56.

⁵ Traboulsi, *Modern Lebanon*, 27.

⁶ Makdisi, *Culture of Sectarianism*, 146.

⁷ Traboulsi, *Modern Lebanon*, 43.

⁸ Elizabeth Picard, *Lebanon: A Shattered Country*, 29.

majority.⁹ When Lebanon's only major population census was conducted in 1932, Christians, Sunnis, Shia, and Druze made up 54%, 20%, 19%, and 6% of the population, respectively.

Table 1: Christian and Muslim Sects as Percentages of Population: 1913–2000¹⁴

	1913	1932	1975	2002
Christians				
Maronite	58.3	28.8	23	
Greek Orthodox	12.6	9.8	7	
Greek Catholic	7.7	5.9	5	
Other	0.8	6.8	5	
Total	79.4	51.3	40	26.4–30
Muslims				
Shi'a	5.6	19.6	27	
Sunni	3.5	22.4	26	
Druze	11.4	6.8	7	
Total	20.5	48.8	60	70–73.6
Total Population	414,963	786,000	2.55 million	3.3 million

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In 1926, France established a constitution that laid the groundwork for a democratic system and recognized informal sectarian power arrangements.¹¹ In 1943, Lebanon, with some help from Great Britain and Egypt, secured its full independence.¹²

The new state was governed not just by its 1926 constitution, but by the unwritten National Pact agreed upon by its two most prominent leaders, Maronite Christian Bishara al-Khoury and Sunni Muslim Riad Solh, in 1943. It was a compromise that saw Christians end

⁹ Tom Najem, *Lebanon: The Politics of a Penetrated Society* (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), 8.

¹⁰ Bassel F. Salloukh, "The Art of the Impossible: The Foreign Policy of Lebanon," in *The Foreign Policies of Arab States*, ed. by Bahgat Korany and Ali E. Hillal Dessouki (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2008), p. 287.

¹¹ Najem, *Penetrated Society*, 9.

¹² Traboulsi, *Modern Lebanon*, 80, 100, 108.

their special relationship with France in return for institutionalized political superiority, and the Sunnis abandoning their aspirations for Lebanon being united with Syria in return for a prominent, protected role in the government. Structurally, it reserved the presidency for a Maronite and the posts of prime minister and speaker of parliament for a Sunni and Shia respectively. Additionally, it was agreed that the parliament would have a six-to-five ratio favoring Christians.¹³ The National Pact sought to achieve a balance between Lebanon's major communal groups and was predicated on their willingness to cooperate, share power, and govern at least partially by consensus. In practice, however, the pact engrained sectarianism into the fabric of Lebanon, pitting its communal groups against each other in a competition for domestic power. The president, and therefore the Maronites, would dominate post-independence politics, undermining the spirit of the pact.¹⁴ Newly independent Lebanon would also be marked by very powerful patronage networks with some 30 families dominating its political and economic spheres, proving unable to shake the preeminence of its landed notable families.¹⁵

Despite these systemic challenges, Lebanon enjoyed a period of significant prosperity and relative calm from 1943 until the early 1970s, with the exception of one domestic crisis. In 1958, President Camille Chamoun, who had already violated the spirit of the National Pact by attempting to dominate the Muslims and allying Lebanon with the West, attempted to violate the constitution by seeking a second term.¹⁶ In response, much of the country revolted in a major challenge to the Lebanese system. Ultimately, the U.S. intervened militarily to calm the situation and oversee a transition from Chamoun to General Fouad Shehab, but the trust between

¹³ Kamal S. Salibi, *A House of Many Mansions: The History of Lebanon Reconsidered* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 186.

¹⁴ Najem, *Penetrated Society*, 14-15.

¹⁵ Traboulsi, *Modern Lebanon*, 115

¹⁶ Michael C. Hudson, *The Precarious Republic: Political Modernization in Lebanon* (New York: Random House, 1968), 273.

Lebanon's Christians and Muslims had been broken.¹⁷ The international aspects of this crisis will be discussed in further detail in the following section.

Lebanon's next period of crisis came after the 1967 Arab-Israeli war as Palestinian militants increasingly used southern Lebanon as a base for attacks against Israel, inciting damaging reprisals.¹⁸ The Palestinians' presence had generally been viewed sympathetically by Lebanon's Muslims and suspiciously by its Christians, and now sectarian tensions escalated once again.¹⁹ They were exacerbated in the early 1970s as President Sulayman Franjeh assigned customarily Muslim-controlled principal ministries to Maronites.²⁰ Eventually, Lebanon's 15-year civil war broke out in April 1975 with Christian militias combating Palestinian fighters and their leftist and predominantly Muslim Lebanese allies.²¹

Lebanon's civil war was not fought exclusively along sectarian lines, but was marked both by competition between the country's confessional groups for national supremacy and between each group's major factions for communal leadership. The first major phase saw the Palestinians and leftists nearly decisively defeat the Christians military with the goal of reformulating the Lebanese system, only to be thwarted by a Syrian intervention in 1976.²² Lebanon then began to divide into sectarian cantons.²³ The next major phase of the war saw the Christians ally with Israel in 1982 in an attempt to drive out the Palestinians and regain their traditionally dominant domestic position. Though thousands of Palestinian fighters were compelled to withdraw from Lebanon, the Christians could not overcome the country's Muslim

¹⁷ Picard, *Shattered Country*, 76.

¹⁸ Yezid Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State: The Palestinian National Movement, 1949-1993* (New York: Oxford University Press), 202.

¹⁹ Abbas Shibliak, "Palestinians in Lebanon and the PLO," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 10 (1997): 262.

²⁰ Picard, *Shattered Country*, 97.

²¹ *Ibid*, 105.

²² *Ibid*, 111.

²³ *Ibid*, 118.

militias, now backed by Syria. The already weak Lebanese state proceeded to collapse and the remainder of the 1980s saw increased sectarian cantonization, cleansing, and Christian and Shia infighting.²⁴ The last major phase of the war came in 1988, when Maronite Michel Aoun, the commanding General of the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) who had been tapped as prime minister, fought to dominate Lebanon's Christian enclaves. Aoun then launched a six-month struggle to expel Syria's forces. Following the 1989 Ta'if Accord, Syria crushed his forces, and he was forced into exile in France.²⁵

In late 1989 the United States and the Arab League facilitated negotiations between Lebanon's sectarian groups that resulted in the Ta'if Accord. The agreement sought to better balance Lebanon's power sharing arrangement by weakening the presidency and dividing the parliament evenly between Christians and Muslims. It also called for the disarmament of all militias and the withdrawal of all foreign forces.²⁶ As will be discussed below, by successfully positioning itself as the arbiter and enforcer of the Ta'if Accords, Syria was able to turn its military occupation into an extensive infiltration and domination of Lebanon and its institutions.²⁷ Damascus coopted those factions that were willing to cooperate, mainly Lebanon's Muslims, and repressed those that were not, mainly the Christians, including the Aounists, Kata'eb, and the Lebanese Forces. As a result, Damascus met with little effective resistance in practically treating Lebanon as a satellite, and the situation remained largely stable until 2004.²⁸

²⁴ William W. Harris, *Faces of Lebanon: Sects, Wars, and Global Extensions* (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 1997), 5.

²⁵ Picard, *Shattered Country*, 138-139.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 156.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 189-190.

²⁸ Harris, *Faces of Lebanon*, 279.

Forty-six years after Camille Chamoun's attempt to extend his presidential term resulted in an insurrection, Bashar al-Assad's decision to effectively impose a three-year extension of his handpicked president, Emile Lahoud, roiled Lebanon. Encouraged by international factors that will be addressed in the following section, Lebanon's Sunnis and Druze broke with the Syrian regime and called for Syria's withdraw from Lebanon. The crisis deepened when former prime minister and billionaire Rafik Hariri, who had become the most powerful man in Lebanon during the Syrian occupation, was assassinated in February 2005. Many Sunnis, Christians, and Druze blamed Syria for the assassination and staged a wave of massive protests in Beirut dubbed the 'Cedar Revolution,' which demanded that Syria end its 30-year occupation of Lebanon. The Assad regime, which was also facing increasing international pressure, complied in April.²⁹ The newly formed anti-Syria March 14 coalition, enjoying the support of the majority of Lebanon's Sunnis, Christians, and Druze, went on to win a resounding victory in Lebanon's 2005 parliamentary elections.³⁰

Between the Cedar Revolution and the Syrian uprising, Lebanon's Sunnis, represented mainly by Saad Hariri's Future Movement, unsuccessfully attempted to turn March 14's momentum into a dominant political position. The first hindrance was the defection of Michel Aoun and his Free Patriotic Movement, the largest Christian party in Lebanon, to March 8. This was a blow both to the size of March 14's majority and cross-sectarian credibility. Then, in November 2006, Hezbollah and its ally Amal withdrew their combined five ministers from Lebanon's cabinet, depriving the government of Shia legitimacy. Hezbollah also organized massive sit-ins in Beirut to press for a unity government. The Fouad Siniora-led March 14 government pressed on until May 2008, when it targeted Hezbollah's control of Beirut's airport

²⁹ Najem, *Penetrated Society*, 71.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 73.

and a key telecommunications system. Hezbollah quickly dispatched its fighters and occupied Beirut in a few short hours, paralyzing the government. The crisis was resolved by the regionally negotiated Doha Agreement, which called for a national unity government in which March 14, March 8, and independents would each hold one-third of the cabinet ministerships, and therefore crucial veto power.³¹ In 2009, March 14 again won more seats in Lebanon's parliament, but again had to form a unity government. In January 2011, Hezbollah led March 8 in withdrawing its ministers and collapsing the government in rejection of the United Nation's Special Tribunal for Lebanon, which was expected to indict Hezbollah members in Rafik Hariri's assassination. Hezbollah was subsequently tapped to form a new government, in which March 14 refused to participate.³² It was March 8 and Hezbollah then, that despite having a minority in parliament, was in control of Lebanon's government as the Syrian uprising began.

International Relations of Lebanon: A Two-level Game

A study of Lebanese foreign policy making reveals a "two-level game par excellence" in which elites at the local level and foreign actors at the international level compete for political power inside Lebanon and the broader region.³³ Within this competition, domestic and foreign players exploit sectarian differences, transnational ideologies, and balance of power politics in pursuit of their own interests.³⁴ Robert Putnam asserts that notions of interdependence and transnationalism entangle actors at the sub-state and supra-state level, insisting, "Neither of the two games can be ignored by central decision-makers".³⁵ The competitive nature of this game

³¹ Najem, *Penetrated Society*, p. 81.

³² *Ibid*, xx-xxi.

³³ Salloukh, *Art of the Impossible*, p 283.

³⁴ Salloukh, *Art of the Impossible*, p. 295.

³⁵ Robert D. Putnam, "Diplomacy and Domestic Politics: The Login of the Two-Level Game", *International Organization*, 42:3, Summer 1998, p. 434.

dates back to the aforementioned 1943 National Pact, which Salloukh describes as the “cornerstone of Lebanon’s political system and foreign policy”.³⁶ The consensual spirit of the National Pact sought to establish a system in which no one group could monopolize power outright, and no significant group could be left fully outside the political framework.³⁷ As Azar and Shnayerson maintain, this attempt at “politics by consensus ultimately produces stagnation,” and leads to gridlock between Lebanon’s competing groups.³⁸

Therefore, political factions seeking to gain an advantage at home align themselves with foreign powers that have little regard for Lebanon’s citizens or stability, beyond their own interests and aspirations.³⁹ On the international plane, the two-level game plays out with foreign actors seeking to orient Lebanese political factions in their regional camps to improve their own positions.⁴⁰ By reaching outside to foreign actors, Lebanon’s political leaders expose an already small, weak, and fractured society to the pressures and prerogatives of stronger states with their own stake in domestic and regional affairs.⁴¹ It is said that the “Lebanese habit of seeking foreign sponsors has been rivaled only by the region’s enthusiasm for intervening in Lebanon”.⁴² Neighboring states such as Syria, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Iran, each with their own regional designs, are more than willing to interfere in Lebanese politics when it suits their goals. On the international level, US, France, Russia, and others have also intervened in Lebanon in pursuit of their own agendas.

³⁶ Bassel A. Salloukh, *The Art of the Impossible: The Foreign Policy of Lebanon*, p. 285.

³⁷ Salloukh, *Democracy in Leb*, p. 135.

³⁸ Azar and Shenayson, *US-Leb Relations: A Pocketful of Paradoxes*, p 229

³⁹ Eyal Zisser, “The Israeli-Syrian-Lebanese Triangle: The Renewed Struggle Over Lebanon”, *Israel Affairs*, 15:4, 2009, p. 400

⁴⁰ Bassel A. Salloukh, *The Art of the Impossible: The Foreign Policy of Lebanon*, 297

⁴¹ *Ibid*, p. 295.

⁴² Azar and Shenayson, *US-Leb Relations: A Pocketful of Paradoxes*, p.247.

Today, this two-level political wrangling continues to impact almost every aspect of Lebanese society, including its foreign policy formulation where competing factions pursue contradictory objectives. “Unlike state-centric theories,” Putnam asserts, “the two-level approach recognizes the inevitability of domestic conflict about what the ‘national interest’ requires.”⁴³ With control of Lebanon’s powerful institutions and political power at stake, and Lebanon’s main communal groups operating at such close parity, strategic calculations guide every alliance. For Lebanon’s political elite, the outcome of this game determines if their factions will be politically empowered, or marginalized, with serious implications on the future of their respective communities.

Throughout Lebanon’s history, two-level dynamics have contributed to Lebanon’s domestic and foreign policy making, although “the direction in which the arrow of causality runs has...been the subject of much debate”.⁴⁴ At times, international factors have impacted Lebanon’s internal dynamics; while other times, domestic politics have driven Lebanon’s international policy (or better, its *policies*). The two-level politics contributed to Lebanon’s position on (and participation in) various Western military pacts, including the anti-Communist Baghdad Pact (1955) and the US Eisenhower Doctrine (1957).⁴⁵ Developments at the domestic, regional, and international level contributed to Lebanon’s first major civil war in 1958.

In the 1958 crisis, Christian President Chamoun’s western orientation alienated Muslims, who saw his embrace of the American Eisenhower Doctrine and pro-Western stance as blatant violations of Lebanon’s consensual spirit and balanced identity.⁴⁶ For their part, Lebanese

⁴³ Robert D. Putnam, “Diplomacy and Domestic Politics: The Login of the Two-Level Game”, *International Organization*, 42:3, Summer 1998, p. 460.

⁴⁴ Bassel Salloukh and Rex Brynen, “*The Impact of the Regional and International Environments*”, Lynne Rienner Publishers 2012, p. 258.

⁴⁵ Azar and Shenayson, *US-Lebanon Relations: A Pocketful of Paradoxes*, p 242.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, pp. 239-40.

Muslims identified more closely with Nasser's notion of pan-Arabism, and sought to align Lebanon more with its Arab neighbors.⁴⁷ Domestic, regional, and international dynamics converged with actors pursuing their own, sometimes conflicting, strategies. When Chamoun vowed to run for a second presidential term in violation of Lebanon's constitution, an already tense political situation spilled into violence, culminating in Lebanon's 1958 civil war.⁴⁸

Chamoun believed he could exploit America's fear of Communism, and invoked the Eisenhower Doctrine, expecting his Western backers to step in to support his efforts to counterbalance Nasser's influence.⁴⁹

Despite Chamoun's calls for US intervention, Washington did not draw a direct correlation between events in Lebanon and international Communism, and did not intervene. It was only in July 1958 with the bloody overthrow and assassination of Iraq's pro-Western Prime Minister, Nuri as-Said, that America came to see its vital interests in the region threatened.⁵⁰ Within 24 hours 15,000 US Marines landed in Beirut, backed up by the 40,000-strong U.S. Sixth Fleet. The Iraqi revolt signaled a drastic change in America's strategic assessment of the crisis in Lebanon, when "U.S. troops went to Lebanon to prevent a "domino" effect originating in Iraq and spreading to the rest of the Middle East".⁵¹ The 1958 political crisis underscored a fundamental paradox in Lebanese foreign policy making that is still relevant today, a half century later. Like many small states surrounded by more powerful regional and international actors, Lebanon tended to overestimate its importance to foreign powers as well as their "ability to accomplish miracles".⁵² For their part, international actors would continue to pursue foreign

⁴⁷ Azar and Shenayson, *US-Lebanon Relations: A Pocketful of Paradoxes*, p 239-40.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, p. 241.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, pp. 240-41.

⁵⁰ Fawwaz Traboulsi, *A History of Modern Lebanon* (Ann Arbor: Pluto Press, 2007), 136.

⁵¹ Azar and Shenayson, *US-Lebanon Relations: A Pocketful of Paradoxes*, p 244.

⁵² *Ibid*, p 221.

policies in Lebanon driven by their regional and international interests, rather than Lebanon's concerns.⁵³

Lebanon has experienced many significant events since 1958; a 15-year civil war from 1975-1990; the 1982 Israeli invasion and occupation of southern Lebanon; the 1989 Ta'if Agreement; the 2005 assassination of Rafik Hariri; the 2006 war with Israel; the 2008 internal political dispute between Hezbollah and other factions; and the recent spill-over of the conflict in Syria. The level of activity between Lebanon and outside states has fluctuated during and in between these key events, yet the principles governing the relationships have remained consistent; despite Lebanon's expectation to be prioritized by foreign actors, the Levant state plays into US policymaking only to the extent it factors into America's regional strategy.

Two-level dynamics were also apparent in the developments surrounding Lebanon's 1975 civil war. Attempts by the Lebanese armed forces to confront Palestinian militias were met by serious outcry from Egypt, Syria, and other Arab states, as well as Lebanese Muslims and other dissident groups. As such, Lebanon was faced with an impossible predicament: when the political elite attempted to crack down against Palestinian militants, significant portions of their own constituents would condemn their actions and they risked losing at home.⁵⁴ If they stood by and did nothing, however, Israeli reprisals would continue to devastate their infrastructure, further destabilizing the situation and undermining their ability to govern. Government stagnated and the country split along sectarian lines, and eventually exploded into civil war in 1975.

The timing of the Lebanese civil war was not ideal for Syrian President Hafiz al-Assad.⁵⁵ Assad had only recently consolidated power in Syria after decades of turmoil, and could not afford to have conflict and instability seep across the border. Moreover, the US-brokered

⁵³ Azar and Shenayson, *US-Lebanon Relations: A Pocketful of Paradoxes*, p 221.

⁵⁴ Salloukh, *Art of the Impossible*, p 291-93.

⁵⁵ Salloukh, *Syria and Lebanon: A Brotherhood Transformed* p 15.

Egyptian-Israeli peace undermined Assad's strategy to regain the Golan Heights.⁵⁶ Risking losing control of events along its border, Syrian troops entered Lebanon in 1976, at the request of the Maronite community.⁵⁷ For Assad, defeat of the Christian militias would draw rival Israel into Lebanon and onto Syria's western border. For the US, Secretary of State Kissinger believed Syria's entry into the Lebanese conflict would neutralize Assad and prevent him from derailing efforts to ease tensions between Israel and its neighbors.⁵⁸ In this manner, two-level game dynamics unfold in Lebanon once again in a "classic war by proxy", where powerful foreign actors permeate a fragmented Lebanese society in defense of their own security interests, while undermining other regional actors.⁵⁹

The 1989 Ta'if Agreement that ended Lebanon's civil war was also subject to the linkages at the domestic and international levels. The agreement itself was an international effort shared between US, Syrian, and Saudi mediators, signed in Saudi Arabia, between Lebanese political factions.⁶⁰ Additionally, Ta'if aligned Lebanon's foreign policy squarely in a pro-Arab, and specifically Syrian, orientation.⁶¹ After the 15-year civil war, the relevant international actors acquiesced to Syria's custodianship in the interest of stability.⁶² Meanwhile, Syria increased its military and security presence in virtually all "civil, political, and security institutions and organizations, establishing a coercive structure camouflaged by controlled political participation".⁶³ During this period, Damascus either eliminated or isolated its opponents in Lebanon, including Christian leader Michel Aoun, who was forced into exile, and Samir Ja'ja,

⁵⁶ Bassel Salloukh, *Syria and Lebanon: A Brotherhood Transformed*, p 15

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, p 15

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, p 15

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, p 16

⁶⁰ Salloukh, *Art of the Impossible*, p. 286.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, p. 286

⁶² Bassel Salloukh, *Syria and Lebanon: A Brotherhood Transformed*, p 16

⁶³ Bassel Salloukh, *Democracy in Lebanon*, p 137

who was imprisoned.⁶⁴ This long era of Syrian control started in 1990 after Ta'if went into effect, and would only begin to unravel in 2003, when regional and domestic developments would weaken Assad's domination of Lebanon.

The regional and international politics surrounding the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States and the 2003 invasion of Iraq would significantly undermine the Assad regime's control of Lebanon. After 9/11, President Bush's administration announced its determination to either "bring our enemies to justice or bring justice to our enemies," eventually launching military operations to topple the Taliban government in Afghanistan and Saddam Hussein's regime in Baghdad.⁶⁵ Washington's strategy of transforming the regional landscape of the Middle East brought a recalcitrant Assad regime under its crosshairs. "Unable to elicit Syrian cooperation in Iraq," writes Salloukh, "Washington now sought to undermine Syria's control over what Damascus had historically cherished as its own security backyard: Lebanon."⁶⁶ Towards that end, US and its allies passed UN Security Council Resolution 1559 in September 2004, which called for "all remaining foreign forces to withdraw from Lebanon," as well as the "disbanding and disarmament of all Lebanese and non-Lebanese militia", directly undermining Syria's regional interests and posed the serious threat to the regime's survival.⁶⁷

Assad interpreted the concerted effort to remove it from Lebanon as a direct attack on his regime's survival, and responded by directing his Lebanese allies to pass an amendment that would extend pro-Syrian President Lahoud's tenure for another three years.⁶⁸ Finally, Rafik

⁶⁴ Bassel Salloukh, *Democracy in Lebanon*, p 139.

⁶⁵ Transcript of President Bush's post 9/11 address to a Joint Session of Congress, September 20, 2001.

⁶⁶ Bassel Salloukh, *Democracy in Lebanon*, p 139.

⁶⁷ Bassel Salloukh, *Democracy in Lebanon*, p 139.

⁶⁸ Salloukh: *Demystifying Syrian Foreign Policy*, 166-7.

Hariri's assassination in Beirut, which many of Assad's opponents directly or indirectly blame him for, triggered an "international tidal wave" that forced Syria's hasty withdrawal from Lebanon in April 2005.⁶⁹

Syria's Uprising and the Multi-Level Response

It was in this historical and international context that Syria's uprising broke out more than two years ago. On the heels of the dramatic revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya and major unrest in Bahrain and Yemen, Syrians began to hold protests in early 2011. In March, the government's detention of a group of boys sparked larger, angrier, demonstrations, and when security forces fired on and killed protesters, a cycle of progressively larger demonstrations met with increasingly severe repression began. As protests spread and grew during the rest of 2011, Assad responded by intensifying the government crackdown, periodically announcing poorly implemented reforms and other underwhelming concessions, and blaming the unrest on external actors and terrorists. Meanwhile, the largely decentralized domestic opposition began to organize, arm itself, and fight back against the regime.⁷⁰

As the violence and number of dead, refugees, and internally displaced persons continued to increase with no signs of abating, the domestic insurrection escalated into a civil war, with the rebels claiming significant swaths of territory. Significantly, Sunni extremists have come to play a major role in the opposition as the conflict has radicalized segments of the population and developed a somewhat sectarian character. The most prominent example of this has been the

⁶⁹ Salloukh, *Democracy in Lebanon*, p 139-40.

⁷⁰ David W. Lesch, *Syria: The Fall of the House of Assad* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 55-57.

emergence of Jabhat al-Nusra, and Salafist group that in April forged a formal alliance with al-Qaeda in Iraq.⁷¹

Simultaneously, the conflict has taken on regional and international dynamics. By early 2012, “a regional proxy war in Syria between Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey, on the one hand, and Iran and Lebanon (Hizbullah), on the other, was clearly gaining momentum.”⁷² This aspect can be seen in the Arab League’s actions toward Syria. In June the Arab League condemned the Syrian government’s violent crackdown for the first time,⁷³ but in July its chief said “the United States had overstepped the mark by suggesting that Bashar al-Assad had lost his legitimacy to rule.”⁷⁴ Assad rejected an Arab League initiative in September, and in November, the league took the significant steps of first suspending Syria’s membership and then imposing significant economic and trade sanctions on the Assad regime. In both cases, 18 of the body’s 22 states voted in favor of the resolutions.⁷⁵ More recently, the Arab League invited Syria’s opposition to assume the country’s seat at its March meeting in Doha.⁷⁶

These moves were largely driven by Qatar, who held the Arab League presidency for most of this period, and Saudi Arabia, with both countries clearly seeing an opportunity to weaken their chief regional rival, Iran.⁷⁷ As the conflict has dragged on, regional actors have played increased roles in it. Turkey strongly condemned the crackdown and then the regime

⁷¹ Tom A. Peter, “Al Qaeda in Iraq and Syrian Rebel Group Jabhat al-Nusra Make it Official,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, April 11, 2013, accessed May 1, 2013, <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2013/0411/Al-Qaeda-in-Iraq-and-Syrian-rebel-group-Jabhat-al-Nusra-make-it-official>.

⁷² Lesch, *Syria: The Fall*, 201.

⁷³ Martin Chulov, “Arab League Issues First Condemnation of Syria Violence,” *The Guardian*, June 14, 2011, Accessed May 1, 2013, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/jun/14/arab-league-condemnation-syria-violence>.

⁷⁴ Lesch, *Syria: The Fall*, 183.

⁷⁵ Lesch, *Syria: The Fall*, 187-188.

⁷⁶ “Opposition Takes Syria Seat at Arab League Summit,” *BBC News*, March 26, 2013, accessed April 21, 2013. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-21936731>.

⁷⁷ Lesch, *Syria: The Fall*, 146.

from an early stage, and has sheltered not only Syrian refugees but also opposition leadership.⁷⁸ Saudi Arabia and Qatar are at this point widely assumed to be providing extensive financial and material assistance to the Syrian rebels, almost certainly including weapons.⁷⁹ On the other side, Iran in September 2012 admitted to dispatching Revolutionary Guards to assist Assad, and is alleged to be providing military aid to his regime on a weekly, if not daily, basis.⁸⁰

A quite similar game is playing out at the global level, pitting the U.S. and much of the international community against Russia, and to a lesser extent, China. As early as May 2011, the U.S. levied sanctions against Assad for human rights violations and in July declared that he had lost legitimacy. In August, the U.S., France, Germany, Great Britain, and Canada called on Assad to resign, and have progressively cut ties with the Syrian government.⁸¹ Meanwhile, Russia and China have regularly joined in condemning the violence in Syria, but have argued that Assad should be part of a solution to the conflict. They acceded to multiple U.N. peace initiatives, but also vetoed Security Council resolutions that would have potentially opened the door for U.N. backed intervention in October 2011, February 2012, and July 2012.⁸² Russia in particular is believed to be continuing to deliver weapons and military equipment to the Syrian regime. As recently as mid-April 2013, Russia's foreign minister Sergey Lavrov insisted that Assad must be included in negotiating any solution to the conflict.⁸³

⁷⁸ Lesch, *Syria: The Fall*, 144-145.

⁷⁹ Justin Vela, "Exclusive: Arab States Arm Rebels as UN Talks of Syrian Civil War," *The Independent*, June 13, 2012, accessed May 5, 2013. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/exclusive-arab-states-arm-rebels-as-un-talks-of-syrian-civil-war-7845026.html>.

⁸⁰ Ian Black, "Iran Confirms it Has Forces in Syria and Will Take Military Action if Pushed," *The Guardian*, September 16, 2012, accessed April 21, 2013. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/sep/16/iran-middleeast>.

⁸¹ "Conflict Timeline," last modified November 2012, <http://beta.syriadeeply.org/conflict-timeline/>.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ Semih Idiz, "Russia and Turkey Remain Apart on Syria," *Al-Monitor*, April 19, 2013, accessed April 21, 2013, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/04/russia-turkey-syria-policy-lavrov-davutoglu.html>.

As the prior section of this paper asserts, these regional and global responses to the Syrian conflict have an impact on how Lebanon leading political factions choose to respond, due to their respective external relations. Secondly then, the competition between those factions and their stances will need to be resolved or compromised on to produce a national policy. The remainder of this paper examines Lebanon's official state response to the conflict, and then analyzes the reactions of Lebanon's seven leading political factions to it.

Lebanon's Official State Response: *Disassociation, Not Condemnation*

Unlike the majority of the world's states, Lebanon has refused to take a strong stance in support of or opposition to the Assad regime. At the UN and Arab League, it has generally chosen to abstain from votes concerning the Syrian conflict. The closest it has come to adopting a formal policy is the June 2012 Ba'abda Declaration.⁸⁴ This agreement between March 8 and March 14 leaders "calls for 'keeping Lebanon away from the policy of regional and international conflicts and sparing it the negative repercussions of regional tensions and crises.'"⁸⁵ This approach can be partially explained by Lebanon's unique vulnerability; in November 2012 the International Crisis Group concluded that the risk of Syria's conflict pushing Lebanon into one of its own was growing daily.⁸⁶ Though Lebanon's leaders all seem to recognize this threat, and generally pay lip service to the disassociation policy, this should not be mistaken for a genuine commitment to it. In fact, Lebanon's leading political factions span the full spectrum of possible

⁸⁴ Nicolas Nassif, "Lebanese National Dialogue: Toning Down the Opposition," *Al-Akhbar English*, June 12, 2012, accessed April 21, 2013, <http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/8361>.

⁸⁵ "U.N. says Lebanon should uphold 'Baabda Declaration,'" *The Daily Star*, February 20, 2013, accessed April 21, 2013, <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Politics/2013/Feb-20/207237-un-says-lebanon-needs-to-maintain-neutrality.ashx#axzz2R9K8qHnm>.

⁸⁶ International Crisis Group, "A Precarious Balancing Act: Lebanon and the Syrian Conflict," Middle East Report 132 (2012): 28.

responses to the Syrian conflict, with parts of the Future Movement actively supporting the opposition and Hezbollah sending fighters to aid Assad. Disassociation then, is really a compromise position necessitated by the superiority of Lebanon's factions over the state.

As asserted in the description of the two-level game, this paper argues that each of Lebanon's political factions makes independent foreign policy decisions based on its own domestic interests. To test this claim, what follows is an examination and analysis of how Lebanon's seven strongest political factions has responded to the Syrian conflict, and why. We begin with Hezbollah, the group that most strongly supports the Assad regime, and end with the Future Movement, at the opposite of the spectrum.

Hezbollah

When the Arab Spring began, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah was a vocal supporter, publicly endorsing the uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain, Libya, and Yemen.⁸⁷ Having seemingly aligned itself with repressed Arab populations over their pro-Western autocratic ruling regimes, Hezbollah, and potentially the rest of the informal Resistance Axis made up of Iran, Syria, Hezbollah, and Hamas, appeared to be well positioned to benefit from the turmoil.⁸⁸ When the regional unrest spread to Syria, however, the group was initially silent. After several months, Nasrallah declared that Hezbollah backed Assad in a late May 2011 speech, and Hezbollah subsequently began to take steps to support the Assad regime.⁸⁹

⁸⁷ "Sayyed Nasrallah to Arabs: Your Spring Has Begun," *Al-Manar*, March 20, 2011, accessed May 3, 2013, <http://www.almanar.com.lb/english/adetails.php?fromval=1&cid=23&eid=6713&frid=23>.

⁸⁸ Michael Scott Doran, "The Heirs of Nasser: Who Will Benefit From the Second Arab Revolution?" *Foreign Affairs* 90 (May/June 2011): 19.

⁸⁹ Hezbollah Media Relations, "Sayyed Nasrallah's Full Speech on May 25," *Al-Manar*, May 30, 2011, accessed February 15, 2013, <http://www.almanar.com.lb/english/adetails.php?fromval=3&cid=33&frid=23&seccatid=14&eid=17623>.

In June 2011, Hezbollah sought to shift attention away from Syria by mobilizing Lebanon's Palestinian refugee population along the Lebanon-Israel border. Otherwise, Hezbollah initially tried to void increasing tensions between Sunnis and Shia in Lebanon by keeping a low profile. However, evidence – such as a number of funerals of Hezbollah members -- quickly began to mount that Hezbollah was training, equipping, and fighting with Assad loyalists.⁹⁰ Hezbollah was also believed to have begun defending Lebanese Shia villages on the Syrian side of the borders from Syrian rebel attacks.⁹¹ On April 30, 2013, Nasrallah ended any remaining suspense by acknowledging in a public speech that Hezbollah members were supporting the Assad regime.⁹² Hezbollah's stance can be understood through an analysis of its unique status within Lebanon, its ideology, and its historical relationship with Syria.

Hezbollah came into being in the early 1980s during the turmoil of Lebanon's civil war. Iran had for centuries cultivated a relationship with the Lebanese Shia population,⁹³ and following its Islamic revolution, it sent troops and part of its Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) to the Bekaa Valley in eastern Lebanon. There, the IRGC laid the foundation for a loose coalition of Shia Islamic groups, including a conservative off-shoot of Amal, to eventually

⁹⁰ Aram Nerguizian, "U.S.-Iranian Competition in the Levant – II," Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2013), 74; Nicholas Blanford, "Accusations Mount of Hezbollah Fighting in Syria," *The Christian Science Monitor*, October 15, 2012, accessed December 1, 2012. [http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2012/1015/Accusations-mount-of-Hezbollah-fighting-in-Syria/\(page\)/2](http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2012/1015/Accusations-mount-of-Hezbollah-fighting-in-Syria/(page)/2).

⁹¹ Timur Goksel, interview with William Hess, audio recording, Beirut, Lebanon, March 12, 2013.

⁹² Ian Black, "Hezbollah is Helping Assad Fight Syria Uprising, Says Hassan Nasrallah," *The Guardian*, April 30, 2013, accessed May 1, 2013. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2013/apr/30/hezbollah-syria-uprising-nasrallah?CMP=twtd>.

⁹³ H.E. Chehabi and Hassan I. Mneimneh, "Five Centuries of Lebanese-Iranian Encounters," in *Distant Relations: Iran and Lebanon the Last 500 Years*, edited by H. E. Chehabi (Oxford: The Centre for Lebanese Studies, 2006), 7.

become Hezbollah.⁹⁴ Hezbollah became infamous over the balance of Lebanon's civil war for its confirmed and alleged perpetration of suicide bombings, kidnappings, plane hijackings, and other attacks against Israeli and western targets in Lebanon.⁹⁵ In terms of the war itself, Hezbollah sided with the Palestinians against Syria and Amal in the 'War of the Camps' in 1985-1988, and battled Amal for supremacy among Lebanon's Shia community. Hezbollah also took the lead in the insurgency against Israel and its proxies in Lebanon over this period.⁹⁶ As a result, when the Ta'if Accords were put in place, Hezbollah permitted to retain its arms by calling itself a 'resistance' group committed to ending Israel's occupation, not a militia.⁹⁷

Hezbollah formally entered Lebanese politics in 1992 when it competed in parliamentary elections, claiming eight of 128 seats.⁹⁸ Over the following decade, Hezbollah also embraced local politics, consolidating its leadership in the Shia areas of Lebanon. Also during the 1990s, Israel launched multiple operations against the group, attempting to defeat its insurgency against its forces in southern Lebanon, but was unsuccessful. Due in large part to Hezbollah's persistent deadly attacks, Israel ultimately withdrew in 2000, giving the group a major victory and increased popularity that translated into gains in Lebanon's elections that year. The 1990s also saw Hezbollah and Damascus become close allies.⁹⁹

Syria had played an important but indirect role in Hezbollah's founding, due to its preeminence in north and east Lebanon during the civil war. Without Syria's tacit approval, Iran

⁹⁴ Nicholas Blanford, *Warriors of God: Inside Hezbollah's Thirty-Year Struggle Against Israel* (New York: Random House, 2011), 44, 46; Naim Qassem, *Hizbullah: The Story from Within* (London: Saqi, 2010), 65.

⁹⁵ Augustus R. Norton, *Hezbollah: A Short History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007) 73-81.

⁹⁶ Blanford, *Warriors of God*, 47, 71.

⁹⁷ Norton, *Hezbollah*, 83.

⁹⁸ Abbas William Samii, "A Stable Structure on Shifting Sands: Assessing the Hizbullah-Iran-Syria Relationship," *Middle East Journal* 62 (2008): 42.

⁹⁹ Norton, *Hezbollah*, 98-102.

would have had a very difficult, if not impossible, time getting Hezbollah off the ground. Syria was also the logistical lynchpin of the relationship, acting as the overland conduit for Iran's material supplying of Hezbollah. Through this role, Syria was able to wield some influence over Hezbollah, but could not control it. True to form, Hafez al-Assad certainly tried to dominate the group, including by backing Amal against it during Shia infighting in the mid-to-late 1980s.¹⁰⁰ Following Ta'if, Hezbollah-Syria relations deepened considerably as Syria systematically established control over Lebanon. Since that time, Damascus has proven to be a reliable provider of direct political, financial, and military backing to Hezbollah, in addition to continuing its role as the primary conduit between Iran and the group. As Syria controlled Lebanese politics until 2005, it deserves some of the credit for Hezbollah's emergence as a prominent political player.¹⁰¹

As previously discussed, when Rafik Hariri was assassinated in February 2005, Damascus was the subject of severe backlash from Lebanon's Sunnis, Christians, and Druzes. In response to the pressure on its patron, Hezbollah proved its extensive popular support by staging a massive 'Thank you Syria' demonstration on March 8—the source of the coalition's name.¹⁰² Syria nonetheless withdrew its forces and when the newly formed March 14 coalition dominated the subsequent 2005 parliamentary elections, it looked as though Hezbollah might be politically marginalized. Yet over the following five years, it would prove itself to be the most powerful actor in Lebanon.

In an interview with the authors, Fares Souhaid, the Secretary-General of the March 14 coalition, described Hezbollah as making two significant political moves to protect itself in

¹⁰⁰ Daniel Byman, "The Lebanese Hizballah and Israeli Counterterrorism," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 34 (2011): 920-921.

¹⁰¹ Samii, "A Stable Structure," 40.

¹⁰² Najem, *Penetrated Society*, 75.

2006.¹⁰³ First, it agreed to a memorandum of understanding with the most powerful Christian leader at the time, Michel Aoun, who had quickly fallen out with his March 14 partners following the 2005 elections.¹⁰⁴ This served to balance against the ascendance of Saad Hariri's predominantly Sunni Future Movement and its coalition partners. Souhaid also argued that Hezbollah's Secretary General, Hassan Nasrallah, intentionally provoked the 2006 war with Israel, allowing him to become "the Che Guevara of the Middle East." Nasrallah's intentions and expectations for Hezbollah's border raid are unknown—he has said he would not have ordered it if he had known Israel would respond with a major offensive—the war had political benefits.¹⁰⁵ A poll taken after the war found that Egyptians thought of him as the region's most important leader.¹⁰⁶ Additionally, it relieved pressure on Hezbollah's continued possession of arms: prior to the war, 49 percent of Lebanese polled wanted Hezbollah to be disarmed, but after the war, only 13 percent did.¹⁰⁷ Hezbollah would use its increased political support, and its arms, to consolidate its political power in Lebanon from 2006 through 2011, as described in the history section.

When Hassan Nasrallah announced his support for the Assad regime in May 2011, he cited the latter's commitment to enact reforms, as well as the regime's historical support for Lebanon and resistance against Israel and Western imperialism.¹⁰⁸ The latter reasons are worth considering further. Many Lebanese would probably dispute the idea that the Assad regime has

¹⁰³ Souhaid, Fares, interview with William Hess, audio recording, Beirut, Lebanon, March 13, 2013.

¹⁰⁴ Hilal Khashan, "Lebanon's Shiite-Maronite Alliance of Hypocrisy," *Middle East Quarterly* 19 (2012): 79.

¹⁰⁵ "Nasrallah Sorry for Scale of War." *BBC News*, August 27, 2006, accessed May 5, 2013. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/5291420.stm.

¹⁰⁶ Morten Valbjørn and André Bank, "Signs of a New Arab Cold War: The 2006 Lebanon War and the Sunni-Shi'i Divide," *Middle East Report* 242 (2007): 7.

¹⁰⁷ Anthony H. Cordesman and William D. Sullivan, *Lessons of the 2006 Israeli-Hezbollah War*, Washington, D.C.: CSIS Press, 2007.

¹⁰⁸ Hezbollah, "Sayyed Nasrallah's Full Speech," *Al-Manar*.

supported their country, but it is certainly true for Hezbollah, as previously mentioned. Losing the political and material support that the Assad regime has long provided, and potentially the use of Syria as a conduit for Iranian support, would be a blow to the organization, but would not put its survival in doubt.¹⁰⁹ Assad's fall would perhaps do more damage to the resistance axis, depriving it of its strongest connection to the wider Arab world.¹¹⁰ Yet Assad has already damaged his 'resistance' credentials, as evidenced by Hamas breaking with his regime.¹¹¹ By supporting Assad, Hezbollah has jeopardized its hard-earned popular support throughout the Arab world, which sympathizes with the opposition.¹¹² Even moderate portions of Syria's opposition have voiced displeasure with Hezbollah's stance, threatening to end Syria's special relationship with the group if it comes to power.¹¹³ Jabhat al-Nusra has gone further, specifically threatening to attack Hezbollah in Lebanon over its role in Syria.¹¹⁴

Clearly, however, Hezbollah considers Assad's survival worth taking significant risks to ensure. While the group is at least somewhat beholden to its external sponsors, it has shown itself to be sensitive to the needs and wants of its other source of power—its domestic political base.¹¹⁵ Indeed, within Lebanon's two-level game, losing an external patron does not merely mean a loss of strategic depth or a supply source, but the risk of domestic political marginalization. Hezbollah has benefitted not only from Assad's material support, but his

¹⁰⁹ Nerguizian, "U.S.–Iranian Competition," xi.

¹¹⁰ Randa Slim, "Hezbollah's Most Serious Challenge," *Foreign Policy: The Middle East Channel*, May 3, 2011, accessed December 7, 2011.

http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/05/03/hezbollah_s_most_serious_challenge.

¹¹¹ Nerguizian, "U.S.–Iranian Competition," 48.

¹¹² Rafid Fadhil Ali, "Hezbollah Risks Regional Credibility by Its Support for the Syrian Regime," *Terrorism Monitor* IX (2011): 8-9.

¹¹³ "Ghalioun Warns Iran, Says Hezbollah Let Down Syrian Opposition," *The Daily Star*, December 7, 2011, accessed December 7, 2011.

¹¹⁴ "Hezbollah Prepares for Attacks by Jabhat al-Nusra in Lebanon," *Al-Monitor*, April 28, 2013, accessed May 6, 2013. <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/04/hezbollah-lebanon-perpares-attacks-jabhat-nusra.html>.

¹¹⁵ Saab and Blanford, "The Next War," 4.

extensive penetration of Lebanese politics and long-time role as ultimate arbiter of the country's internal affairs. Losing Assad would not change Hezbollah's status as the strongest power within Lebanon, but it would risk putting it in a position where it would become increasingly more dependent on its arms to preserve itself—arms that may be less frequent in coming.

Amal Movement

Of Lebanon's Shia political factions, Nabih Berri's Amal Movement has historically been more moderate than its radical offshoot, Hezbollah, and has taken a more nuanced position on the current conflict in Syria. While extreme elements of Amal splintered off in 1982 to form Hezbollah and resist Israel's invasion and occupation, Amal's role of protector of Lebanon's Shia dates back to the mid-1970's.¹¹⁶ Despite longtime ties with Assad's Allawite regime in Syria, Amal's primary responsibility is to Lebanon's Shia constituents, to whom it Amal is ultimately responsible, and from whom the organization derives its political relevance.

(Nerguizian, interview)¹¹⁷

While Amal supports the Assad regime in Syria, the organization is acutely aware of Assad's vulnerability, and the potential fallout facing Lebanon's Shia community if he falls and the mainly Sunni Syrian opposition takes over.¹¹⁸ (Nerguizian) In an interview with Amal's Political and Media Advisor, Ali Hamdan articulates the organization's primary concern of regional violence spilling into Lebanon: "Turbulence is on the border, and Lebanon is in danger of exploding. Israel has been at war since 1948; Jordan is screaming; Iraq has dealt with unrest since [the US} invasion; Turkey has serious problems. Lebanon is tiny, and the government can

¹¹⁶ Vali Nasr, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts Within Islam Will Shape the Future*, W.W. Norton Publishing, 2006, p. 143.

¹¹⁷ Nerguizian interview, Washington D.C., March 2013.

¹¹⁸ Nerguizian interview, Washington D.C., March 2013.

barely make disassociation work. The ring outside Lebanon is closing.”¹¹⁹ This sensitivity demonstrates Amal’s historic concern for Lebanon’s Shia community.

At its founding, Imam Musa Sadr established Amal to protect Lebanon’s disenfranchised Shia community, who had been shut out of the Lebanon’s political, economic, and social infrastructure.¹²⁰ “In the bourgeois Christian and Sunni Muslim imagining of Lebanon,” writes Harris, “the Shia were an afterthought.”¹²¹ Under al-Sadr’s leadership, Lebanon’s Shia community began to mobilize to contest the existing Maronite/Sunni establishment.¹²² Amal’s populist narrative quickly attracted a large number of underprivileged Shia outside the existing political framework. Ideologically, Sadr’s Lebanese-focused Shiism differed from the Ayatollah Khomeini’s revolutionary radicalism, eventually putting him at odds with the Iranian regime, and strengthening Amal’s ties with Syria.¹²³ ¹²⁴ At the time, the governing Maronite leadership supported Sadr’s movement in hopes it would divide and weaken Lebanon’s Muslims.¹²⁵

Amal drew its strength from Lebanon’s sizeable Shia population, but also through a close alliance with Syria that began in 1976 when Syrian troops entered the Shia areas of the Beqaa Valley. Musa Sadr’s support of the invasion stemmed from a belief that Syrian involvement would bring about an end to the Lebanese civil war, but was also based in an ideology that recognized the Alawites of Syria as part of the Shia Ja’afari School of thought.¹²⁶ Additionally, Assad and Amal shared a common disdain for the PLO, which led Syria to regard Amal as its

¹¹⁹ Ali Hamdan Interview, Beirut , March 2013

¹²⁰ Azar p. 10.

¹²¹ William Harris, *Lebanon: A History, 600-2011*, Oxford, 2012, p. 232.

¹²² *Ibid*, p. 232.

¹²³ Vali Nasr, pp 141-42.

¹²⁴ William Harris, *Lebanon: A History, 600-2011*, Oxford, 2012, p. 232.

¹²⁵ Nir, 3.

¹²⁶ *Ibid*, 5.

“chief agent in the Islamic sector”, providing the Shia organization with much needed Syrian weapons.¹²⁷

In the early stages of the civil war, Sadr’s Amal militias limited their activities to protection of Shia neighborhoods in Beirut. As a result, more radical elements within the Shia community challenged Sadr’s leadership, seeking direct-armed confrontation in the war.¹²⁸ In August 1978, Sadr disappeared, or better, *was* disappeared, while visiting Libya.¹²⁹ Nabih Berri took over Amal in 1980, at a time when the Shia were not yet a major player in Lebanese politics and the community was in disagreement over the extent to which Shia militias should be engaged in active combat. Berri’s Amal movement welcomed Israel’s 1982 invasion of southern Lebanon, which dealt with the persisting Palestinian problem.¹³⁰ The Israeli army crushed the leadership of the rival Sunni PLO factions, and drove them from southern Lebanon, leaving Berri’s Amal movement well positioned to fill the power vacuum.¹³¹

Berri’s ties to Damascus are based on his background and ideology, but also stem from the protection his Syrian patrons provide. As a youth, he was a member of the pro-Syrian Lebanese Ba’ath Party that served as a base of Syrian support within Lebanon. In addition to the military assistance Amal receives from Syria, Damascus has consistently defended Berri from challenges within the Lebanese political structure.¹³² As such, Amal can be seen as a longtime client of Syria, and shares its patron’s ideological, regional, and international orientation. Domestically, Berri’s greatest strength is derived from his ability to distribute resources to large and loyal Shia political base, and in turn, demand political relevance. (Nerguizian, 4/19)

¹²⁷ William Harris, *Lebanon: A History, 600-2011*, Oxford, 2012, p. 249.

¹²⁸ Nir, 5.

¹²⁹ Nerguizian interview, Washington, D.C., March 2013.

¹³⁰ Vali Nasr, pp 114

¹³¹ Nir, 32.

¹³² *Ibid* 61.

Another source of Amal's political capital comes from its ability to distinguish from Hezbollah and present itself a more palatable alternative to actors who find Hezbollah too unsavory to deal with. By juxtaposing itself against the more radical Shia group, Amal leverages its negotiating position vis-à-vis other Lebanese factions and international actors alike.

Nerguizian explains that "The ability to say '*We're not Hezbollah*,' allows Amal to engage more directly with the US; the ability more directly engage the Europeans; the ability to be on good terms with the Saudis".¹³³

With respect to the uprisings in Syria, Amal is walking a difficult tightrope. Amal is attempting to maintain its support of the Assad regime, without diminishing its ability to engage politically with Lebanon's various political factions in defense of the Shia community.¹³⁴

Publicly, Amal has fully supported the Assad regime. Amal MPs were part of a delegation of Lebanese representatives that visited Damascus in April 2013 to meet with President Assad, and the Amal Foreign Minister, Adnan Mansour recently condemned the Arab League's decision to suspend Syria's membership, stating "Communication with Syria ... is essential for a political solution."¹³⁵ ¹³⁶ In the political arena, Amal has supported consensus candidate Tamam Salam's bid to become prime minister and form a new government.¹³⁷ Salam, an experienced Sunni MP officially aligned with the March 14 coalition, enjoys a rare degree of independence and the backing of a broad range of actors, including Future Movement leader Saad Hariri, Saudi

¹³³ Nerguizian interview, Washington, D.C., March 2013.

¹³⁴ Nerguizian interview, Washington, D.C., March 2013.

¹³⁵ Wassim Mroueh, "Assad critical of Lebanon's disassociation policy: Qanso", The Daily Star, April 22, 2013, <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Politics/2013/Apr-22/214650-assad-critical-of-lebanons-disassociation-policy-qanso.ashx#axzz2S00hVBhq>

¹³⁶ "Amal MP: Lebanon FM should be awarded over Syria stance", Ya Libnan, March 10, 2013, <http://www.yalibnan.com/2013/03/10/amal-mp-lebanon-fm-should-be-awarded-over-syria-stance/>

¹³⁷ Hania Mourtada, "Sunni Leader Is Named Prime Minister in Lebanon", The New York Times, April 6, 2013, <http://www.yalibnan.com/2013/04/04/tamam-salam-appears-to-be-the-consensus-pm-designate/>

intelligence chief Prince Bandar, the Shia groups Amal and Hezbollah, as well as the apparent blessing of Bashar al-Assad, who recently advocated the utility of having an established politician lead Lebanon.^{138 139}

Berri's priority is protection of the Shia community, however, he understands that he must continue to work within Lebanon's political establishment to achieve that goal, and he seeks to minimize the spillover of the conflict into Lebanon. Ali Hamdan insists, "Amal wants reform in Syria, but we believe there are two ways: through fighting, or through dialogue. The goal right now is stability, because the fever is too high, and the heat will burn everyone."¹⁴⁰ In essence, Amal's position thus far in the Syrian conflict is no different from role it has always played: a strong advocate for the Shia community; a clear line of communication to Damascus and its allies; a willing intermediary between Lebanon's other sects and the outside world; and a constant reminder of a more militant alternative.

Free Patriotic Movement/Aounists

Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement is one of the dominant Christian parties in Lebanon, and the only major Christian political faction currently aligned with the March 8 coalition. Under the leadership of General Michel Aoun, the Christian group long referred to as the *Aounists* (Aoun only established FPM in 2003 while still exiled in France), has seen its

¹³⁸ "Tamam Salam appears to be the consensus PM designate", Ya Libnan, April 4, 2013, <http://www.yalibnan.com/2013/04/04/tamam-salam-appears-to-be-the-consensus-pm-designate/>

¹³⁹ Imad Mrammel, "Assad Criticizes Lebanon's Policy of Dissociation With Syria Crisis", Al Monitor, April 24, 2013, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/politics/2013/04/syria-assad-interview-lebanon-dissociation.html>

¹⁴⁰ Ali Hamdan interview, Beirut, March 2013.

influence rise and fall over the decades.¹⁴¹ As previously discussed, the once powerful Christian community saw its power wane over the course of the fifteen-year civil war; its privileges stripped in the Ta'if Accords that followed; its autonomy curtailed by Syria's long military occupation; and its leadership exiled and imprisoned.¹⁴² Since 2005, domestic, regional, and international developments, including the withdrawal of Syrian troops in 2005, and the subsequent return and release of Christian leaders, have allowed the Christian community to slowly reassert itself into Lebanon's political scene.¹⁴³

These limited opportunities notwithstanding; the Christian community faces significant challenges as it attempts to strengthen its position within Lebanon. Historic divisions within the Christian community and hostility among its leadership have thus far hampered their ability to regain power.¹⁴⁴ The absence of a single, unifying leader and the lack of a powerful and supportive regional patron has left the Christian community isolated, divided, and splintered between Lebanon's two major coalitions.¹⁴⁵ In light of the conflict in Syria, Lebanon's Christian's differed over how to best secure their future, and the factious community split into two camps.¹⁴⁶ Samir Gagea's Lebanese Forces and Amine Gemayel's Kata'eb factions sided

¹⁴¹ "The New Lebanese Equation: The Christians' Central Role", International Crisis Group, Middle East Report Number 78, July 15, 2008, pp. 1-2

¹⁴² Ibid, p. 2.

¹⁴³ Ibid, p. 4.

¹⁴⁴ Tom Najem, p 43.

¹⁴⁵ The New Lebanese Equation: The Christians' Central Role", International Crisis Group, Middle East Report Number 78, July 15, 2008, p. 5.

¹⁴⁶ "The New Lebanese Equation: The Christians' Central Role", Executive Summary, International Crisis Group, Middle East Report Number 78, July 15, 2008, p. 2.

with the March 14 coalition, while Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement issued a memorandum of understanding with Hezbollah and aligned with the March 8 movement.^{147 148}

For Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement, the path to joining the March 8 coalition in support of the Syrian regime he once violently opposed was not straightforward. After his triumphant 2005 return to Lebanon following 15 years in exile, Aoun's primary concern was to obtain a prominent government post to protect the Christian community he represents, and signal his return as its leader.¹⁴⁹ When Aoun failed to translate his 2005 electoral success¹⁵⁰ into a prominent government post with the March 14 coalition, the experienced political broker decided to break his political isolation by joining the March 8 coalition.¹⁵¹ For Aoun, the self-proclaimed leader of the Christian community, political marginalization was unacceptable, and aligning with March 8 afforded his party greater ability to control their destiny, and to address its primary concerns.¹⁵²

Historically, the FPM/Aounist leader, General Michel Aoun, has been a powerful player on the Lebanese political scene for decades. Aoun first came to power as a commander of the Lebanese Armed Forces during the civil war.¹⁵³ Aoun derived his legitimacy from two key

¹⁴⁷ "Paper of Common Understanding Between Hezbollah and the Free Patriotic Movement", February 6, 2006. <http://www.nala.com/resources/articletype/articleview/articleid/95/paper-of-common-understanding-between-hezbollah-and-the-free-patriotic-movement.aspx>

¹⁴⁸ "The New Lebanese Equation: The Christians' Central Role", International Crisis Group, Middle East Report Number 78, July 15, 2008, p. ii.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid, p. 4.

¹⁵⁰ In Lebanon's 2005 parliamentary elections that took place months after Aoun's return from exile, his Change and Reform bloc secured an impressive 21 seats, 14 of which Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement won. (See: "The New Lebanese Equation: The Christians' Central Role", International Crisis Group, Middle East Report Number 78, July 15, 2008, pp. 4, 7).

¹⁵¹ Nerguizian interview, Washington, D.C, March 2013.

¹⁵² "The New Lebanese Equation: The Christians' Central Role", Executive Summary, International Crisis Group, Middle East Report Number 78, July 15, 2008, pp. 1-2.

¹⁵³ Tom Najem, p 42.

constituent bases: the Christian community he represented; and the powerful military establishment he led. While Aoun's tactics and alliances have shifted over time, his goals have been to protect the rights and interests of Lebanon's Christian community, prevent its weakening influence within Lebanon's political system, and to establish himself as the uncontested leader of the Christian Maronite community.¹⁵⁴

Aoun's contentious ascendency to power occurred in 1988, during the chaos and instability of the waning days of the Lebanese civil war. When the electoral process collapsed, outgoing president Amin Gemayel appointed Aoun as prime minister through a controversial military decree.¹⁵⁵ The move provoked the outcry of many, including Assad who feared Christian leadership of Lebanon would undermine Syria's interests; as well as Lebanese Muslims who condemned the action.¹⁵⁶ Nevertheless, General Aoun rebuffed opposition to his rule, and moved to consolidate control by attacking both rival Lebanese political factions, as well as the powerful Syrian military.¹⁵⁷

Despite his military experience, Aoun was unsuccessful in both undertakings. First, Aoun took on the rival Lebanese Forces to solidify his authority over the Christian community, before moving to confront other opponents.¹⁵⁸ After intense fighting in which the "Maronite community tore itself apart" resulting in significant civilian and material losses, Aoun was unable to fully disband LF, and had to settle instead for a ceasefire.¹⁵⁹ Second, and more devastating, Aoun launched a "war of liberation" in 1989 to expel Syrian forces from Lebanon

¹⁵⁴ The New Lebanese Equation: The Christians' Central Role", International Crisis Group, Middle East Report Number 78, July 15, 2008, pp. 2, 7.

¹⁵⁵ William Harris, *Lebanon: A History, 600-2011*, Oxford, 2012, p. 254.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid*, p. 254.

¹⁵⁷ Najem, 43.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 43.

¹⁵⁹ William Harris, *Lebanon: A History, 600-2011*, Oxford, 2012, p. 256.

and reclaim the country's sovereignty. Assad was troubled by Aoun's unpredictability, his cross-sectarian appeal, and his stubborn refusal to accept defeat.¹⁶⁰ Then, when Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990, Assad capitalized on the US desire for broad Arab support by offering to join the US-led coalition against Saddam. In exchange, Washington stood aside and allowed Assad to act at will against his Lebanese opponents.¹⁶¹ Syrian airstrikes against the presidential palace quickly defeated Aoun's defenses, forcing him to surrender and eventually be exiled to France.¹⁶² In 2005, following the withdrawal of Syrian troops, Aoun returned to Lebanon determined to reemerge from exile and isolation.¹⁶³

In the May/June parliamentary elections of 2005, Aoun's bloc won 21 seats, mainly in Christian districts.¹⁶⁴ Given this electoral success, ICG reports that Aoun believed he had reclaimed his place as "protector of the Maronites" and "leader of the Christian community", and earned a prominent position in the new March 14-formed government.¹⁶⁵ Instead, the March 14 coalition rejected Aoun's bid to become president, and in fact, offered him no government post. At risk of being politically marginalized, Aoun took his Free Patriotic Movement to the March 8 coalition where his 21 parliamentary seats made up a statistically significant portion of the opposition bloc.¹⁶⁶ Aoun calculated that from the opposition alliance he could effectively block any March 14 candidates, and offer himself as a compromise candidate to the presidency that "he

¹⁶⁰ William Harris, *Lebanon: A History, 600-2011*, Oxford, 2012, p. 254, 256.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid*, pp. 254, 257.

¹⁶² Najem, 43.

¹⁶³ William Harris, *Lebanon: A History, 600-2011*, Oxford, 2012, p. 270.

¹⁶⁴ "The New Lebanese Equation: The Christians' Central Role", International Crisis Group, Middle East Report Number 78, July 15, 2008, p. 7.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid*, p. 7.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid*, pp. 8-9.

made no secret” he aspired to.¹⁶⁷ Aoun couched his alliance with the pro-Syria bloc he had once opposed as a move towards national unity and cross-sectarian dialogue necessary for Lebanon’s stability.¹⁶⁸ The Free Patriotic Movement and Hezbollah issued a memorandum of “common understanding” in February 2006, which maintained that only through “national dialogue” and “unifying consensual will” could Lebanon overcome its challenges and emerge from crisis.¹⁶⁹

Additionally, the FPA partnership with the Shia can be seen as an “alliance of minorities” to balance against Sunni domination.¹⁷⁰ By forming a resistance bloc with Hezbollah, the Free Patriotic Movement can neutralize the potency of a Sunni ascendancy, and protect the interests of the Christian community. As FPM’s director of diplomatic relations explains, “For Hezbollah and us this was a win-win. And we didn’t have an alternative: the others wanted our heads”.¹⁷¹ Furthermore, isolated in a region without a strong external support, Lebanon’s various Maronite factions are left to constantly align and realign internally to ensure their political survival.¹⁷²

With respect to the current conflict in Syria, it is against this historical, political, and sectarian context we must understand Aoun’s current alignment with the March 8 coalition. Aoun’s decision follows from a strategy of remaining politically relevant within Lebanon, while uncertainty over Syria’s future raises the stakes for the Maronite community. Ideally, Christians

¹⁶⁷ The New Lebanese Equation: The Christians’ Central Role”, International Crisis Group, Middle East Report Number 78, July 15, 2008, pp. 6, 9.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid, p. 8.

¹⁶⁹ “Paper of Common Understanding Between Hezbollah and the Free Patriotic Movement”, February 6, 2006. <http://www.nala.com/resources/articletype/articleview/articleid/95/paper-of-common-understanding-between-hezbollah-and-the-free-patriotic-movement.aspx>

¹⁷⁰ “The New Lebanese Equation: The Christians’ Central Role”, International Crisis Group, Middle East Report Number 78, July 15, 2008, p. 9.

¹⁷¹ “Ibid, p. 8.

¹⁷² Salloukh, *Art of the Impossible*, 296

prefer a Syria without Assad *and* without Islamists.¹⁷³ Their current alliance with Syria's backers is "uneasy" and not without reservations.¹⁷⁴ Given the current reality, however, Syria will most likely be controlled by one or the other. Neither alternative is optimal, but of these options, Aoun has selected to align himself with the devil he knows. His decision was influenced by a fear of being politically isolated and a desire to balance with other factions. Of course, Aoun's personality and ambition must also be factored into the equation. The aging politician has been forthcoming of his desire to lead Lebanon once more, in an era unburdened by either the civil war or Syrian intervention.¹⁷⁵ Perhaps, as Lebanon's only major politician who has resisted significant external patronage, Aoun has nowhere to turn but within Lebanon itself.¹⁷⁶

The Progressive Socialist Party

While the rest of March 8's leading political factions have thus far maintained varying degrees of support for the Syrian regime, the Progressive Socialist Party (PSP), led by Druze chieftan Walid Joumblatt, has become increasingly critical of Assad. The PSP In a March 2013 interview, Joumblatt said, "I thought, stupidly like so many others, that Bashar could do reforms, but when I saw later on that he was choosing and on purpose massacring his own people I said: no more."¹⁷⁷ He has not visited Damascus since mid-2011, but has twice gone to Moscow, where he said he attempted to convince Russia's leaders that Assad cannot be part of the solution in Syria. Joumblatt said he has also tried to convince Syria's Druze population that its future is

¹⁷³ Jose Rodriguez, "Christians dream of Syria without Assad, Islamists", AFP, March 12, 2013, <http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5gCzKur0XcmLeps6ZrCxrqbx1wHCw?docId=CNG.7cdabcca9e6a6664a393d432f0d12ed3.281>

¹⁷⁴ Aram Nerguizian, "Lebanon, Syrian Instability, and the Risks of Sunni-Shiite Competition", Center for Strategic and International Studies, October 23, 2012, <http://csis.org/publication/lebanon-syrian-instability-and-risks-sunni-shiite-competition>

¹⁷⁵ "The New Lebanese Equation: The Christians' Central Role", International Crisis Group, Middle East Report Number 78, July 15, 2008, p. 6, 12.

¹⁷⁶ Salloukh, *Art of the Impossible*, p. 297.

¹⁷⁷ Walid Joumblatt, interview by William Hess, audio recording, Beirut, Lebanon, March 13, 2013.

with Sunni Arabs. Overall, though, the PSP's shift appears to be more of a pivot to the middle than a changing of sides. In Lebanon's recent political wrangling, Jomblatt took the lead in coordinating the nomination of Tammam Salam as prime minister with Saudi Arabia, but still insisted that Hezbollah have a place in the cabinet.¹⁷⁸ In regard to the conflict, the PSP advocated for disassociation even prior to the Ba'abda declaration.¹⁷⁹ The PSP currently holds seven seats in Lebanon's parliament and held three ministries in its cabinet prior to the resignation of Prime Minister Najib Mikati in March 2013.

The Progressive Socialist Party was founded in 1949 under the leadership of Walid's father Kamal Jomblatt. In its early days, the PSP pursued democratic and populist policies including the elimination of noble titles and sectarian quotas in the chamber of deputies.¹⁸⁰ The PSP was largely a vehicle for Jomblatt, who was a major player in Lebanese politics.¹⁸¹ He was instrumental in forcing the resignation of President Bishara al-Khoury in 1952, a major leader of the 1958 insurrection against Chamoun, and widely recognised as Lebanon's leading Muslim by the early 1970s.¹⁸² Early in Lebanon's civil war, Jomblatt led the leftist Lebanese National Movement (LNM) coalition, which along with its Palestinian allies, had conquered approximately 80 per cent of Lebanon by March 1976. Yet Jomblatt failed to convince Syria's President Hafez al-Assad to permit his bid to secularize and reform Lebanon, resisted Syria's advance into Lebanon, and in March 1977, was assassinated, most likely at the behest of

¹⁷⁸ "Aoun Says to Facilitate Formation of New Govt," *The Daily Star*, April 7, 2013, accessed April 21, 2013. <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Politics/2013/Apr-07/212841-saudi-arabia-congratulates-salam-on-new-post.ashx#ixzz2SScaklFf>.

¹⁷⁹ "PSP, Kataeb Discuss Averting Repercussions of Syria Crisis." *The Daily Star*, March 16, 2012, accessed May 1, 2013. <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Politics/2012/Mar-16/166879-pp-kataeb-discuss-averting-repercussions-of-syria-crisis.ashx#ixzz2SFZ5Z11E>.

¹⁸⁰ Traboulsi, *Modern Lebanon*, 125.

¹⁸¹ Najem, *Penetrated Society*, 17.

¹⁸² Traboulsi, *Modern Lebanon*, 176.

Assad.¹⁸³ Walid was then pressed into leadership; he said, “I had to choose, to protect my community and to protect the Palestinians, I had to go to Damascus” to repair relations with Assad.¹⁸⁴ He allied the PSP with Syria and against Kata’eb and its eventual Israeli allies and established a Druze canton on Mount Lebanon. At the end of the war, the PSP embraced the Ta’if accords and opposed Michel Aoun’s ‘War of Liberation.’¹⁸⁵

Joumblatt said that he remained “one of the closest allies of Damascus” until 2004 when Bashar al-Assad sought to extend President Emile Lahoud’s term by three years. He said this caused him to break with Damascus because, “[he] knew that Lahoud was going to abolish normal life, political life.”¹⁸⁶ Joumblatt was part of the “Bristol Commission” that opposed Assad in 2004 and when the March 14 coalition coalesced following Rafik Hariri’s assassination in February 2005, Joumblatt was a prominent member.¹⁸⁷ The PSP won an impressive 16 seats in that year’s parliamentary elections, second only to Saad Hariri’s Future Movement. However, as Syria and Hezbollah rebounded in the following years, Joumblatt sought to repair relations with both entities.¹⁸⁸ In August 2009, as March 14 was trying to form a government after its electoral victory, the PSP left the coalition, and in March 2010, Joumblatt went to Damascus to repair ties with Assad.¹⁸⁹ In January 2011, the PSP backed and joined Hezbollah in its formation of a government.¹⁹⁰

Considering this history of the PSP, perhaps it is little surprise that it is the only major political faction in Lebanon to shift in its stance toward Assad since the beginning of the

¹⁸³ Ibid, 194, 204.

¹⁸⁴ Joumblatt interview.

¹⁸⁵ Traboulsi, *Modern Lebanon*, 224.

¹⁸⁶ Joumblatt interview.

¹⁸⁷ Michael Young, *The Ghosts of Martyrs Square* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010), xv.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid, 235.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid, 241-242.

¹⁹⁰ Najem 2012, 124.

uprising. Jomblatt is known as a maverick that “will move however the winds change.”¹⁹¹ Yet Jomblatt does not change his positions on a whim, but rather with clear motivations. Jomblatt seeks to remain “ahead of the curve on the transformations in Lebanon” and to play an axial role in politics, in order to stave off political insignificance for himself and the Druze community.¹⁹² This approach is clearly reflected in the PSP’s response to the Syrian conflict. Jomblatt said his current political priority is “to protect the Druze, I’m trying to do my best to protect the Druze from any tension inside Lebanon.”¹⁹³ To do so, the PSP is trying to prevent the Syrian conflict from overflowing into Lebanon, and concurrently trying to make sure it has as few enemies as possible in case violence does break out. Ultimately, Jomblatt believes Assad will fall, and is doing his best to make sure that the Druze do not fall with him.¹⁹⁴

Having assessed the most prominent political factions that were part of the Hezbollah-led March 8 coalition and government when the Syrian uprising broke out, this analysis turns its attention to the leading factions of the March 14 alliance: Kata’eb, the Lebanese Forces, and the Future Movement.

The Kata’eb Party

Of the March 14 political factions considered in this paper, the Kata’eb Party has responded to the Syrian conflict with the most caution. While the Kata’eb’s leader, former President Amin Gemayel has stated that the regime in Syria must change, he has also advocated for a policy of ‘positive neutrality’ toward the conflict.¹⁹⁵ Accordingly, the Kata’eb have demonstrated only tacit support for the Syrian opposition and a strong commitment to Lebanon’s

¹⁹¹ Bassel Salloukh, interview by William Hess, audio recording, Beirut, Lebanon, March 13, 2013.

¹⁹² Young, *The Ghosts*, 241-242.

¹⁹³ Jomblatt interview.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁹⁵ Nicolas Nassif, “Amin Gemayel to March 14: Keep Out of Syria,” *Al-Akhbar English*, May 13, 2012, accessed May 1, 2013. <http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/7294>.

official disassociation policy. Even prior to the Ba'abda declaration, in March 2012, the Kata'eb met with the Progressive Socialist Party to discuss “joint efforts toward strengthening Lebanon from any negative repercussions.”¹⁹⁶ Prominent Kata'eb members have criticized the responses of some of its March 14 allies to the conflict as being premature and overly emotional.¹⁹⁷ As recently as March 2013, the Kata'eb Party advocated for the Lebanese army and international security forces increase their deployment on the Lebanese-Syrian border to better protect Lebanon from getting dragged into Syria's war.¹⁹⁸

Like Lebanon's other Christian parties, the Kata'eb has a long history of antagonism with Syria. The party was established in 1936 as a paramilitary youth organization by Amin Gemayel's father Pierre and others. Part of its original platform was that Lebanon should have nationalism distinct from its surrounding Arabs, specifically Syria.¹⁹⁹ Kata'eb established itself as a major party when it acted as the primary Christian protagonist of Lebanon's aforementioned 1958 civil conflict.²⁰⁰ Kata'eb considers itself to have “succeeded in preserving the Lebanese formula” and continued to oppose systemic reforms “as defenders of narrow sectarian privileges” before and during Lebanon's civil war.²⁰¹ For most of the war, the Kata'eb was once again the leading Christian faction, with Amin's younger brother Bashir rising to power with assistance from Michel Aoun and Samir Geagea—the current leader of the Lebanese Forces, which Bashir

¹⁹⁶ “PSP, Kataeb Discuss,” *The Daily Star*.

¹⁹⁷ Elie Hajj, “Lebanese Christians Divided Over Action in Syria,” *Al-Monitor*, December 28, 2012, accessed May 1, 2013. <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2012/al-monitor/lebanese-christian-divided-syria.html>.

¹⁹⁸ “Kataeb Calls for Making Lebanon-Syria Border ‘Military Zone.’” *NOW Lebanon*, March 4, 2013, accessed May 1, 2013. <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/lebanonnews/kataeb-calls-for-making-lebanon-syria-border-military-zone>.

¹⁹⁹ Traboulsi, *Modern Lebanon*, 102.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid*, 137.

²⁰¹ “History,” Last modified on March 2, 2012. <http://party.kataeb.org/history.php>; Traboulsi, *Modern Lebanon*, 176.

created in 1980 to be the Kata'eb's armed wing.²⁰² Bashir, thanks to Israel, was elected president in 1982, but he was assassinated before taking office by a member of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party, most likely under orders from Damascus. Amin was then begrudgingly pressed into service as president.²⁰³ He was unable to match his brother's dominance of the Christian militias, and Geagea and Aoun eventually broke off from the Kata'eb. Upon completing his term in 1988, Gemayel promptly exiled himself.²⁰⁴

In the post-Ta'if period, the Kata'eb Party was fractured, with parts being suppressed and others coopted by the Syrian occupation. However, Amin was permitted to return to Lebanon in 2000, and the party began to coalesce in opposition to Damascus. In 2005, the Kata'eb participated enthusiastically in the Cedar Revolution and joined the March 14 coalition. In the years since, however, the Kata'eb has been victimized multiple times in the wave of assassinations perpetrated against March 14 members, most notably when Amin Gemayel's son Pierre, a member of parliament, was killed in 2006.²⁰⁵ Considering all of the bad blood between the Kata'eb and the Assad regime, it would be little surprise if the party chose to actively work for its downfall, but as mentioned, this is not the stance that Amin Gemayel has taken.

In a February 2012 interview, Gemayel gave three reasons for adopting his policy of positive neutrality in response to the Syrian conflict. First, he argued that because the conflict had become an international one, intervening would put Lebanon at risk of being “squashed under the weight of the involvement of others.”²⁰⁶ Second, he expressed concern that because the Lebanese are divided on the conflict, getting involved would turn into another battlefield in it. Third, Gemayel suggested that not intervening would guide Syrians toward embracing a new

²⁰² “Lebanese Forces Party,” 2009, 1.

²⁰³ Traboulsi, *Modern Lebanon*, 206.

²⁰⁴ Najem, *Penetrated Society*, 39.

²⁰⁵ “History.”

approach of mutual non-interference in its relations with Lebanon. Gemayel was probably more honest about his motives, however, when he went on to describe the uncertainty over the conflict's outcome and recall how much the Kata'eb had suffered for resisting the Syrian regime in the past.²⁰⁶ Gemayel and Kata'eb clearly want Assad to fall, but not as much as they want to avoid risking backlash at his or his allies' hands should he manage to survive.

Lebanese Forces

A longtime opponent of Syria's role in Lebanon and the Assad regime, the Lebanese Forces (LF) have reacted positively to the Syrian uprising. They believe that Assad will fall, and consider it very important that he does. In an interview with the authors, an advisor to the Lebanese Forces' president Samir Geagea, Elie Baraghid, characterized the weakening of Assad's regime as "a breath of oxygen." He said that the LF was "supporting the rebels, due to our belief in the rights of people and we cannot go against the tide of history, which is of democracy, freedom, and the will of the people." (Baraghid 2013) In September 2011, Samir Geagea, head of the Lebanese Forces, said that Christians must be "leaders of the Arab liberation movement" not "defenders of backward and brutal regimes." He said Christians should not fear what was happening in the region, and criticized them for becoming "sandbags defending brutal and backward regimes."²⁰⁷ This position on the Syrian uprising coincides directly with the history of the party's relationship with the Assad regime, and its purported ideology.

Since its formation in 1980 as the armed wing of the Kata'eb Party, the Lebanese Forces have opposed Syria's presence and influence in Lebanon. They describe their genesis as "a

²⁰⁶ Nicolas Nassif, "Gemayel on Syria: Positive Neutrality," *Al-Akhbar English*, February 29, 2012, accessed May 1, 2013. <http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/4685>.

²⁰⁷ AFP, "Christians Must Not Support Brutal Regimes: Lebanese Leader," *Al-Arabiya News*, September 24, 2011, accessed December 1, 2012. <http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/09/24/168493.html>

spontaneous popular response to the Palestinian and Syrian-backed military and paramilitary groups that threatened the very existence of Lebanon, and were on the verge of a hostile takeover.” (LFP 2009, 1) As mentioned earlier, the LF allied with Israel and assisted with its 1982 invasion in an attempt to counter that threat and establish dominance over a reconstituted Lebanon. The LF claims that they “strongly antagonized the Syrians” for the duration of the 1980s, including during the early stages of the General Michel Aoun-led “liberation war.”

The LF ended their fight against Syria by responding positively to the Ta’if Agreement. The LF cite this stance as the reason that Aoun turned against them and sought to establish dominance over the Christian areas of Lebanon. Following Ta’if, the LF gave up their weapons and sought to become a traditional political party. The reconstituted LF did not, however, embrace Syria’s heavy-handed implementation of the agreement, and as a result was targeted by the new, Syria-dominated, Lebanese republic. The LF was banned, its license revoked, and assets confiscated. Its leader, Samir Geagea, was convicted in a widely criticized trial for purportedly playing a role in a deadly church bombing, and thrown into solitary confinement. Many other members of the LF were targeted and imprisoned, often illegally, and some were subjected to torture. The party was effectively suppressed throughout the period of Syria’s occupation of Lebanon.²⁰⁸

Following the Cedar Revolution, in late 2005, Samir Geagea was one of the figures released in a general amnesty, and the Lebanese Forces began to reestablish its political party. It developed bylaws, a manifesto, and the required infrastructure to compete for seats in parliament and participate in the government, and became part of the March 14th coalition. In the 2005 elections, the Lebanese Forces won five seats in parliament and had one minister in the cabinet. In 2009, it won eight seats and was rewarded with two ministers. Despite the LF being able to

²⁰⁸ “Lebanese Forces Party,” 1.

legally exist and even enjoy some success in Lebanese politics, the LF's relationship with Syria did not change. It argues that Syria had "the same aims, players, and meddling in all the aspects of internal affairs in Lebanon."²⁰⁹ Though the military occupation had ended, Syria was still able to do whatever it wanted in Lebanon, including conducting assassinations, transporting weapons, and placing its agents there. The LF alleges that much of this was accomplished through Syria's proxies, Amal and Hezbollah. Baraghid said, "The only thing that changed [was] the nature, not the degree."

Since the uprising, Baraghid believes that this has changed. He admits that "Syria can still harm Lebanon," but contends that "the authoritarian regime is shaking" and that it "will become weaker day by day." Baraghid and his political assistant predicted that Assad's fall would mean chaos for Lebanon, but viewed this as a positive. Baraghid said, "Hezbollah will have to think twice about any decision. March 14 will have the chance to build a real state... The fall of the Syrian regime will be a great chance for Lebanon, for all of the groups, ultimately."

Baraghid rejected the premise that Christians, as a regional minority, must seek protection either by allying with other minorities or relying on a dictatorship. He said it was a "success of the Syrian regime to convince the Aounists" that they need protection. Particularly in Lebanon, he emphasized, everyone is a minority, even the Sunnis and Shia, and the Christians "are a pillar" of the country. Baraghid admitted that the LF leadership is hearing concern from its constituents about the fate of Christians in the region, but he blamed this on "a lot of propaganda from the regime, that the Salafis are coming." He argued that leading and fighting for their rights was the best security for Christians, and that only the presence of democracy would ensure their safety. Baraghid noted that members of all communities were being killed in

²⁰⁹ Elie Baraghid, interview by William Hess, audio recording, Beirut, Lebanon, March 16, 2013.

Syria, and argued that the Christians that were targeted were not victimized because of their faith, but for failing to support the rebellion.

Ultimately, the Lebanese Forces is presenting itself as a party struggling for “the freedom of individuals and communities, the sovereignty of Lebanon, and all the rights of the society.”²¹⁰ It contends that Syria has always been an obstacle to those objectives. Baraghid said that from the beginning, Syria did not recognize Lebanon as an independent, sovereign state, “but as a satellite or as a stolen territory” and that the Ba’ath regime specifically viewed it as “an integral part of greater Syria.” Baraghid argued that for the Assads it went even further, and that “retaining control over Lebanon is more important than regaining the Golan Heights and is the second priority after the survival of the regime.” It views the uprising in Syria as the solution that it has been hoping for since the 1970s.

Future Movement

Of the political factions examined in this paper, the Sunni Future Movement is the most ardent opponent of the Assad regime. In addition to blaming Damascus for the assassination of Rafik Hariri, the political faction (currently headed by his son) resents the Syrian security presence it feels has suppressed Lebanon’s independence, and denied the Sunni community the privileges promised to them in the Ta’if Accords.²¹¹ In the years since Syria’s military withdrawal, the Future Movement (FM) has experienced varying degrees of political control and a tenuous relationship with regional actors. While FM seeks to capitalize on Assad’s embattled

²¹⁰ Baraghid interview. Beirut, March 2013.

²¹¹ Salloukh, *A Brotherhood Transformed*, p. 17.

state, it must be careful not to repeat the 2008 episode when it suffered a humiliating defeat at the hands of Hezbollah, after turning its aggression against Assad's Lebanese backers.²¹²

Lebanon's Sunni community, which accounts for approximately one quarter of its population, has been as susceptible and welcoming to outside backing as the country's Shia and Christian groups. Lebanese Sunnis differ from their Shia and Christian compatriots, however, in that they are part of a regional Sunni majority. This regional-domestic dynamic, like many aspects of Lebanon's political identity, plays into a two-level game where internal concerns cannot be divorced from external competition.

Historically, Lebanon's Sunni community has enjoyed distinct opportunities—and faced unique challenges—due to its religious affiliation. One significant advantage is the community's ties to powerful Sunni regimes. External backers, such as Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states, provide Lebanon's Sunnis valuable economic, military, and diplomatic support, as they attempt to impose their orientation on the broader region.²¹³ On other issues, such as support for Palestinians, association with Sunni groups has presented serious challenges for Lebanon's Sunni community. Conflicts involving Palestinian refugees and their PLO leadership in Lebanon triggered multiple conflicts between Israel's military might and a much weaker Lebanese Armed Forces.²¹⁴ The Lebanese civil war altered the sectarian balance considerably. In its aftermath, the Sunni community stood to gain the most from the post-war Ta'if Accords.²¹⁵ Ta'if Accord's promise of greater political power was never realized, however, due to Syrian domination of Lebanese institutions.²¹⁶

²¹² International Crisis Group, "Lebanon's Politics: The Sunni Community and Hariri's Future Current," Middle East Report 96 (2010): 13.

²¹³ Sallokh, "Art of the Impossible," 297.

²¹⁴ *Ibid*, 296.

²¹⁵ Salloukh, *A Brotherhood Transformed*, 17.

²¹⁶ International Crisis Group, "Lebanon's Politics," 2.

Between 2003 and 2005, a series of regional and international events, culminating with the assassination of Rafik Hariri, eventually drove Syrian troops from Lebanon after three decades of occupation.²¹⁷ Hariri's February 14, 2005 assassination exacerbated the fault lines of an already tense Lebanese political landscape. For Lebanon's Sunni community, Hariri's killing marked a repositioning of their relations with Syria. Having acquiesced to Syrian domination for years, Sunnis saw an opportunity to realize the political relevance denied them after the civil war and end their marginalization.²¹⁸ To Lebanese Sunnis, the Alawite regime in Damascus had sidelined its community as a means of repressing its own Sunni majority.²¹⁹ Assad's treatment of Sunni politicians, including Rafik Hariri, was humiliating to Sunni leaders.²²⁰ The assassination of the "larger than life" Hariri empowered the Future Movement to break ties with Syria, end its subordination to Damascus, and demand sovereignty and independence.²²¹

The widespread condemnation that followed Hariri's assassination led the Future Movement to believe it had a public mandate to shape post-Syria Lebanon; and Syrian military's hasty withdrawal after three decades of occupation convinced them it was possible. As Nerguizian explains, "You had a Future Movement led by Hariri that wanted the Syrians out; when they were physically out, that wasn't enough."²²² Opposition to Syria and its Shia backers inside Lebanon put Future Movement on a crash course with Hezbollah.²²³ The Daily Star's Michael Young points out, "There was a danger here: What was initially an intifada against a system imposed by outside, by Damascus, became a domestic struggle, one with worrisome

²¹⁷ Salloukh, DIL, 139-40.

²¹⁸ International Crisis Group, "Lebanon's Politics," 5.

²¹⁹ Ibid, 6.

²²⁰ Ibid, 6.

²²¹ Ibid, 2, 7.

²²² Nerguizian interview. Washington D.C., March 2013.

²²³ Salloukh, Remaking Lebanon After Syria, p. 223.

sectarian overtones as Sunnis and Shiites came to resent one another.”²²⁴ With Hezbollah on the defensive inside Lebanon, the Special Tribunal investigating Hariri’s assassination, resentment on both sides escalated and paralyzed government.

These tensions culminated in the May 2008 standoff between Hezbollah and the Future Movement when the March-14 led government attempted to shut down Hezbollah’s telecommunication network and to sack Beirut airport’s security chief LAF general Wafiq Shuqayr – an alleged ally of Hezbollah – from his post. Hezbollah responded in a stunning show of force. In a matter of hours, masked Hezbollah gunman took over West Beirut, killing dozens of Future Movement fighters, and emasculating the Sunni-led government in the process.²²⁵ Lebanese Sunnis were outraged that Hezbollah would turn its weapons inward in a domestic struggle.²²⁶ The episode ended any hopes of any grand Sunni resurgence, and recalibrated Lebanon’s delicate sectarian balance, as encapsulated in Saad Hariri’s Saudi backers sending him to Damascus to reconcile with Assad.²²⁷ The affair can also be seen as a microcosm of Lebanon’s fragile sectarian system. As Salloukh describes, Hezbollah’s reaction was “not without context;” indeed, it was the “inevitable result of the [Future Movement’s] disregard of the consensual principles of the sectarian system and its refusal to share power with the opposition”.²²⁸

With the current uprising in Syria, Nerguizian explains, “the natural yearning for revenge against Assad has returned”.²²⁹ Once it became clear that Assad could not quickly suppress the

²²⁴ Michael Young, “It’s Renewal Time for a Grim March 14,” *The Daily Star*, March 14, 2013. <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/Opinion/Columnist/2013/Mar-14/210017-its-renewal-time-for-a-grim-march-14.ashx#axzz2S00hVBhq>.

²²⁵ International Crisis Group, “Lebanon’s Politics,” 13.

²²⁶ Salloukh, *Democracy in Lebanon*, p. 145.

²²⁷ International Crisis Group, “Lebanon’s Politics,” 13-14.

²²⁸ Salloukh, *DIL*, p. 145.

²²⁹ Nerguizian interview. Washington, D.C., March 2013.

uprising, the Future Movement tacitly unified around support for the opposition. But as the civil conflict grows into all-out civil war, the Future Movement is faced with two choices; either to view the moment as an opportunity to “deal a definitive death blow to the Assad regime that has done much to undermine Sunni autonomy in Lebanon; or to stand clear of the chaotic and unpredictable crisis completely.”²³⁰

Currently, the Future Movement faces two major challenges in its opposition to Assad: one is a crisis of overconfidence, and the other the absence of leadership. First, it must overcome the fallacy that Assad’s demise is a foregone conclusion. Elements within the Future Movement are planning for the “day after Assad” despite the fact that the opposition has been unable to topple him after two years of civil unrest. Nerguizian characterizes this illusion by explaining that some Future Movement activists believe that a triumphant Saad Hariri will be on the first plane to Damascus—as a symbolic final dig to regime that oppressed the Sunnis, and a nod to powerful Arab leaders of days gone—before riding a wave of support to cheering fans in Beirut.²³¹ Additionally, even if Assad should fall in Syria, Lebanon’s Shia, particularly Hezbollah, will remain a dominant military and political force within Lebanon, and the Future Movement will have to work with them or against them. If recent history serves any warning to the Sunni group, Future Movement will dial down its tone against Hezbollah.²³²

Second, Saad Hariri’s prolonged absence from Lebanon has damaged his credibility and left the Future Movement without a strong domestic leader to rally around and to advance their message. Despite his lineage and strong Saudi and US support, Nerguizian puts forth that some believe if Saad does not physically to Lebanon for the upcoming elections, someone else might rise to lead the Sunni community. Additionally, the longer Saad Hariri is absent, the more likely

²³⁰ Nerguizian interview. Washington, D.C., March 2013.

²³¹ Ibid.

²³² Young, “It’s Renewal Time,” *The Daily Star*.

Sunni fringe elements will step up to fill the power vacuum. Given the ongoing civil war in neighboring Syria, jihadi insurgents have been increasingly active, and reports have surfaced that elements of Jabhat al-Nusra have been active in Lebanon recently.²³³ While Lebanon is not a jihadi stronghold, elements of al-Qaeda linked and Egyptian jihadists have been known to operate out of Lebanon before, and the Syrian conflict will only continue to attract more insurgents.²³⁴

For the time being, the conflict in Syria provides the Future Movement with a cause to rally around, and its supporters continue to oppose the Assad regime and support the opposition. Nevertheless, the ongoing crisis threatens stability and credibility of Sunni organization, and its leaders recognize their limitations in affecting the outcome. While Hezbollah fighters are perceived to be more heavily invested in their support of the Assad regime, one Future Movement MP admits, “We have no intention, of course, to go beyond media and political support and the aid we are providing for displaced Syrians in Lebanon”.²³⁵ In a society in which political relevance is akin to political survival, and leaders must deliver to their constituencies, lest they be replaced, the Future Movement is faced with crisis of credibility whether Assad falls, survives, or even wins the current conflict.

Conclusion

We have established that the reactions of Lebanon’s leading political factions to the Syrian conflict are best explained through an understanding of the two-level game. Through our

²³³ Jean Aziz, “Jabhat Al-Nusra Reportedly in Lebanon”, *Al Monitor*, December 24, 2012.

<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2012/al-monitor/jabhat-al-nusra-lebanon.html>.

²³⁴ Ali Hashem, “Lebanon Is Pivotal For Syria’s Jihadists”, *Al Monitor*, April 9, 2013. <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/04/jabhat-al-nusra-lebanese-jihadists-rafiq-hariri.html>.

²³⁵ Elie Hajj, “Lebanon’s Future Movement Deals with Syria Conflict”, *Al Monitor*, November 12, 2012. <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/04/hezbollah-involvement-syria-domestic-repercussions.html>.

examination, we find both local and international actors willing to exploit the competitive nature of Lebanon's sectarian politics, and leverage the permeability of its society in pursuit of discreet national interests. We conclude that political factions within Lebanon determine their position on external development based on what best serves their specific domestic interests, leading to multiple –and often conflicting—foreign policies prerogatives. Time and again, we observe Lebanon’s stagnant consensus-driven system impede the emergence of clear and effective foreign policy choices, and lead to government paralysis and “least bad” compromises. In this context, Lebanon’s official policy of “disassociation” to the ongoing conflict in Syria seems logical, if not necessary.

Our examination of the internal dynamics governing Lebanese factional interaction provides not only an explanation of how groups have arrived at their current positions, but also offers an understanding of how they might behave in the future. Given Lebanon’s competing political coalitions stand either in support or against Assad, the Ba’ath regime’s survival or downfall will influence the balance of power in Lebanon. As such, each faction is faced with difficult decisions on how to proceed. With the outcome of the Syrian crisis still uncertain, Lebanon’s political factions have measured their responses accordingly, jockeying for position internally, while refraining from exceedingly polarizing behavior. However, a significant shift in the balance between Assad and the opposition fighters may alter the strategic calculus of Lebanon’s March 14 and March 8 coalitions – especially the mainly Sunni Future Movement and Shia Hezbollah – with potentially destabilizing consequences.

If Assad were to fall, the factions making up the March 14 coalition must decide the extent to which they may attempt to capitalize on a seemingly more favorable regional

environment. The Future Movement, which has thus far taken the most aggressive stance against Assad, would be faced with a dilemma: they could either accommodate Shia factions, including Hezbollah, or they could see this as an opportunity to be more hawkish, and try to push for full disarmament Hezbollah. The latter scenario risks a repeat of the May 2008, wherein Hezbollah counter-escalated to preempt efforts to address its weapons arsenal. Hezbollah may yet again interpret a more aggressive March 14 approach as an assault on Lebanese Shia communal prerogatives and respond violently to restore the tenuous equilibrium.

For its part, Assad's fall would also present Hezbollah with a difficult predicament: Lebanon Shia factions could accept emerging geopolitical realities and acquiesce to the demand of a perceived regional Sunni ascendancy while maintaining control of Lebanon's Shia community. Conversely, Lebanon's Shia – led by Hezbollah – could feel cornered and lash out violently to secure their political autonomy and a better position from which to engage Lebanon's Sunnis.

Each group's perception of the situation has serious implications on their decision. A miscalculation either way could have disastrous consequences not only for both parties, but for all factions that are likely to get embroiled in the dispute. The above scenarios speculate on reactions of the Future Movement and Hezbollah, groups at the opposite ends of Lebanon's Sunni-Shia divide where the risks of miscalculation are greatest. In contrast, one can expect the Druze and Christian factions to be broadly conservative with each balancing and angling to best protect their own constituencies.

U.S.-Lebanon Policy Implications

While not the focus of our examination, our observations are timely to U.S. policymakers and have implications for policy towards Lebanon and the broader region. The cyclical nature of the US-Lebanese relationship has historically been fraught with paradox and contradiction, and the current situation proves no different. Writing in 1984, Azar and Shnayerson describe a relationship characterized by “peaks of intensive interaction,” followed by “lulls of inactivity and withdrawal”.²³⁶ Today, nearly three decades later, the relationship seems to have changed very little. As such, we believe the value of our dissection of Lebanese political factions lies in the patterns it reveals, providing implications on future behavior. While some of the actors have changed—though many of them have not—the underlying dynamic remains essentially stable: U.S. policy towards Lebanon continues to be guided by America’s regional and international concerns; meanwhile, Lebanon maintains an overblown sense of its importance to US policymakers, along with an exaggerated interpretation of American capability and capacity in the region.

Given this relationship, both the US and Lebanon must scale back their expectations of one another. Lebanese political factions cannot rely on the U.S. to intervene on their behalf, particularly when America’s vital interests are not directly threatened. Saad Hariri’s Future Movement was reminded of this reality during the 2008 political crisis.²³⁷ As a whole, the Lebanese government should limit its involvement in the Syrian conflict by abstaining from controversial U.N. or Arab League votes and refraining from provocative statements in favor or

²³⁶ Azar and Shnayerson, pg 220

²³⁷ Mara E. Karlin and Eric S. Edelman, “Fool Me Twice: How the United States Lost Lebanon—Again”, *World Affairs*, May/June 2011, <http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/article/fool-me-twice-how-united-states-lost-lebanon%E2%80%94again>

opposition to the Assad regime or the opposition.²³⁸ In short, Lebanon should embrace its disassociation policy, guard fiercely against elements that jeopardize its delicate balance, and maintain a low profile to avoid attracting further crises and instability.²³⁹

From the U.S. perspective, policymakers must learn from past experience and accept the government's disassociation policy. Furthermore, Washington must accept its limitations in influencing events in Lebanon, and the inherent challenges of orienting Lebanon towards a pro-Western stance. Additionally, the U.S. must resist the inclination to address its grievances with Hezbollah now, despite what some perceiving the group to be in a vulnerable position. Ideally, Washington would prefer to abstain from Lebanon's messy internal politics, while forcing its policy preferences on the weak and fragmented state. Unfortunately, the US cannot have it both ways. It was American inability to understand Lebanon's nuanced political landscape that compelled the George W. Bush administration to muscle through UNSCR 1559, against Hariri's protests.²⁴⁰ The US-led UN resolution disregarded the delicate regional balance, and sparked violence that sent Lebanon to its darkest days since the civil war, culminating in the collapse of the March 14 led government.²⁴¹ The US would do well to accept the conclusion Karlin and Edelman reached in 2011: that the US has "run out of breath" in Lebanon, lost its credibility, and

²³⁸ "A Precarious Balancing Act: Lebanon and the Syrian Conflict", International Crisis Group, Middle East Report Number 132, November 22, 2012, p. iii.

²³⁹ Daoud Rammal, "Lebanon Is No Longer a US Priority", Al Monitor – Lebanon Pulse, March 18, 2013, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/politics/2013/03/lebanon-not-american-priority.html>

²⁴⁰ Najib B. Hourani, "Lebanon: Hybrid Sovereignties and U.S. Foreign Policy", Middle East Policy Council, Spring 2012, p. 47

²⁴¹ Mara E. Karlin and Eric S. Edelman, "Fool Me Twice: How the United States Lost Lebanon—Again", World Affairs, May/June 2011, <http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/article/fool-me-twice-how-united-states-lost-lebanon%E2%80%94again>

with it, the battle for Beirut.²⁴² Given the uncertainty of the focus on current conflict in Syria, Washington could use a “disassociation policy” of its own to prevent any further escalation in Lebanon, which would in turn have unpredictable regional consequences.

Final Thought: Enemy Brothers, Once Again

As Lebanon moves forward in the shadow of the Syria crisis, it would serve Lebanese of all backgrounds well to learn from the country’s past. In his seminal book on modern Lebanese history, Fawwaz Traboulsi recalls a mythical tale of sectarian violence that dates back to Lebanon’s founding:

“Here, born from the sea, like in the myths of old, are the ‘enemy brothers’, of the chronicler Abikarius:

During the fighting, a Druze got a hold of a Christian. They battled and resisted each other and went on fighting until they reached the waterfront from which they fell into the water still exchanging punches and blows. A huge wave unfurled and dragged them into the open sea where they were swallowed up by the tide. The next morning, their corpses were recovered on the beach scrunched up in a tight embrace and gripping each other's hands.”²⁴³

The parallels to the current conflict are too gripping to ignore. From one perspective, the ‘enemy brothers’ in this timeless scene embody the passion and tragedy that has come to define Lebanese factional dynamics. History seems to be replaying, and Lebanon’s “brothers” are once again entangled in a tragic and self-defeating crisis. Given the scope of the unrest in Syria and the likelihood that it could spill across the border, Lebanon’s political leaders must stop fighting each other long enough to acknowledge the impending sea of conflict that threatens to engulf their society and

²⁴² Mara E. Karlin and Eric S. Edelman, “Fool Me Twice: How the United States Lost Lebanon—Again”, *World Affairs*, May/June 2011, <http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/article/fool-me-twice-how-united-states-lost-lebanon%E2%80%94again>

²⁴³ Traboulsi, p. 40

the broader Levant. Lebanon's competing factions must find a way to reclaim the consensual spirit present at the country's independence, but which has escaped them thus far. Only by doing so does Lebanon stand a chance of achieving the stability necessary to maintain a precarious internal cohesion, secure its borders, and by extension, its destiny in a volatile and unforgiving region.

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