



## **Religion and State in the modern Middle East: The Lebanese State as a model**

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Religion and State in the late Ottoman Empire: a brief

Historical background

This study confines itself to the relation between religion and state in the Middle Eastern area that was created after the fall of the Ottoman Empire in the World War I. It would not be correct to talk in terms of a complete break of the new modern state with its historical roots, before and during the nineteenth century.

Albert Hourani describes the historical background of the modern Middle East as follows: One the one hand, there were ancient societies, created by certain uses of limited natural resources, given shape and direction by the laws, practices and doctrines of a dominant religion, Islam, and ruled by Muslim Imperial governments; this society was not static, but was changing by processes generated from within itself and limited by the resources made available by the technology of the time. On the other hand, there were changes of other kinds and at different paces, made possible by the use of new technology and the consequent accumulation of greater resources in North -Western Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. These changes were communicated to the Middle East by way of international trade, new kinds of communication and education, and new forms of administration and law, imposed either by indigenous governments wishing to acquire the strength of the European states, or else by those states themselves as they expanded their empires by means of the military strength given them by changes in their societies.

As a result, some historians tended to look at the history of the modern Middle East as a history of the " Eastern Question ", that is to say of the history of this region as a problem in the relations between the Great European States. Some others viewed the history of this region as a history of Muslim societies which have their own inherited norms of communal behavior and for which the modern period has been marked by attempts made by foreign powers, or by local ruling groups unfaithful to their traditions, to impose an artificial order upon society.

Hourani concludes that:" it would be better to see the history of this period as that of a complex interaction: of the will of ancient and stables societies to reconstitute themselves, preserving that they have of their own while making the necessary changes in order to survive in a modern world increasingly organized on other principles, and where the centers of world power have lain for long, and still lie, outside the Middle East ".

This is the way in which we analyze the relation between Religion and State in the Modern and contemporary Middle East. However, from the occupation of Egypt by the French in 1798, a

new phase of the Middle East history was started. The balance between central or local authorities and the European powers had changed. The rural area under control of the ottoman cities had also shrunk, and that under control of lords of the mountains and the tribal chiefs had expanded. It became more difficult for ottoman governors to collect the tax revenue needed to maintain their armies and administration. The rule of the Ottoman Empire came to an end in the nineteenth century in Algeria, Aden, Arab Gulf Area, Egypt, Sudan, Tunisia, Morocco and another ottoman wilayets in Arab and Balkan lands.

The European interference became a great factor in the heart of the Ottoman Empire. The relations between Europe and the Middle East area was completely changed, especially in the Mount- Lebanon after the long civil war 1840- 1860. The Egypt, as well as the Ottoman Empire itself, began to create a new army and modern state on the European models. Its methods of administration also changed, and new civil codes were brought in, modeled upon those of western European states.

In a final remark, the Europeans carried with their interference to the Modern Middle East the idea of the modern state, the new army, the idea of citizenship and the rights and duties, the idea of equality between citizens of different sects, ethnic and tribal groups. And, shortly after the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, the Ottoman Empire came to its end many new modern states were created in the Middle East under the direct control of The French and British mandates. A new Turkish Republic under Kemal Ataturk was inherited the old Ottoman Empire. As a result, a new phase of history was started in this area, but the relation between religion and modern state becomes more difficult than before. The creation of the Lebanese modern State offers a typical model in this way.

### The Modern Lebanon

The modern Lebanon is a small country in the Middle East, with about 210 Kilometers from north to south, and between 30 and 90 Kilometers wide. The largest cities lie on the coast: the capital Beirut, Tripoli, Sidon and Tyre, Zahleh, Baalbeck and Nabatiyyeh. The highest peak of Lebanon is the Black Peak in the North with 3068 meters of high. Lebanon has two large plains: The Beqa' in the interland, and Akkar at the coast. The longest river of Lebanon is Litani. The country does not have interesting mineral resources.

In Lebanon, geography is just as important as history, because it was a rugged country, with a difficult access. Actually, Lebanon has given refuge to all kind of dissidents groups. The Lebanese communities survived together with their own characteristics. As a result of its long and rich history and isolated peaks and valleys, Lebanon was inhabited by more than seventeen autonomous sects, as well as by a big number of ethnic groups. The Lebanese sects are: Sunnis, Shiites, Druzes, Maronites, Greek Orthodox, Greek Catholics, Latins, Protestants, Armenian Catholics, Armenian Orthodox, Chaldeans, Syriac Catholics, Assyrians, Jews, Alawittes, and others.

None of these sects constitutes a majority. Lebanon is one of the few countries that can claim to be composed totally of ethno-religious minorities or sects. The seventeen officially recognized sects are now broadly divided between Christian and Moslem Communities living on all Lebanese territories. On the other hand, the majority of the Lebanese sects are Arabs. Among the non-Arab ethnic groups in Lebanon, the Armenians are the largest group. There are also Kurds, Chaldeans, white Russians, Assyrians, Syriacs, many European minorities, and others. Armenians are the most politically organized group. They have many Ministers and Deputies in Lebanon. They have also three political parties in this country: The Dashnak, the Hynchak, and the Ramgavar Azadagan party. Recently, the Lebanese institutions declared officially the legacy of some new sectarian or

religious groups like Coptes, Ismailis, and others new comer ethnic and religious groups or minorities.

Before 1861, Mount Lebanon had been part of the wilayets or provinces of Damascus, Sidon and Tripoli. But, after civil war of 1860 between Druzes and Maronites, Mount Lebanon was officially recognized as a political entity.

From 1861 to 1914, the Mount Lebanon, as a Mutassariffiya under the ottoman rule, was stripped of its cities of Beirut, Tripoli, Sidon and Tyre, and its plains of Beqa' and Akkar. It was administrated by a non - Lebanese Christian ottoman, governor, or Mutassarif which was appointed by the ottoman Empire after the consent of the five European powers, guarantors of the Mutassariffiya regime, and is directly responsible to the ottoman rule.

At that time, the Mount Lebanon was transformed into a Christian entity under a European protection. The confessional conflict offered to the European powers the way through which to extend their influence in the Ottoman Empire. The Lebanese problem was open to external exploitation, and thus was exploited.

In 1920, France imposed herself in Syria and Lebanon against the will of the majority of the population. And, when the France was given the Mandate Regime over Syria and Lebanon in 1920, Lebanon continued to be more of a mosaic of religious Communities than a unified political entity or a modern state. And, from September first 1920, the state of Greater Lebanon was established by

The French Mandate. Since then, Lebanon became a republic with his present frontiers. The Lebanese Representative Council proclaimed it three days after the approval of the Lebanese Secular Constitution in May 23, 1926. During the Mandate regime 1920 - 1943, France fostered the belief in a Phoenician origin and a non-Arab identity among the Maronites and Greek Catholics.

Finally, in 1943, Lebanon achieved its independence and joined the League of Arab states and the United Nations as a founding member in 1945. The independent Lebanon was still largely divided in so many different ways, because, in such a country of so many religious groups, it was not possible to create any kind of stable national solidarity.

Some particularities of the Lebanese model of the pacific coexistence between religious Communities in a modern State for a long period in history, Lebanon was, and still is a country of many religious communities. Some of Lebanese groups try to prove that their country has existed since the old Phoenician era, and to stress its independence and uniqueness since immemorial time. Needless to say that, in the course of history, many conquerors came to the area, known now as the modern state of Lebanon, and left it later on. There are no basic divisions between Lebanese people in terms of ethnic divisions. There are religious communities, which should not be mistaken for ethnic groups. Language, culture, customs, music, food are common to all Lebanese communities. The social and political divisions certainly exist in Lebanon as in any other society, but they are not as they had been portrayed in the mass - media during the long Lebanese civil war of 1975-1990.

One should notice that the Lebanese people lived in peace for a long time before the intervention of foreign powers in the Ottoman Empire, since the beginning of the nineteenth century, to create the Lebanese confessional problem. The following points characterized the coexistence between religion and state in modern and contemporary Lebanon during the Peacetime:

A -Modern Lebanon was created as an Autonomous Mountain Society

Known in the Bible as the Mountains of Perfumes, Lebanon has majestic mountains and valleys, and the beautiful climate of the four seasons and the eternal snows all over the year. And, because of the variety of its physical features, Lebanon has significant differences in climate within short distances. In Lebanon, mountains and valleys have played an important role in the formation of Communities; the Quadisha valley in the case of the Maronites, and the Wadi-el-Taim for the Druzes.

The mountain communities possessed a strong sense of particularity and uniqueness. Their geographical situation enabled them to develop their own special characteristics that distinguished one community from the other.

They were mountain peasants with strong ties to the land. Their attachment to their homeland in their mountain was very deep. They regarded the Mount Lebanon with a strong spirit of independence. They developed between them the notion of resistance to any foreign conqueror.

According to their strong spirit of independence in their mountains and valleys, the Lebanese communities did not regard themselves as an integral part of any foreign state. Some of them had close tie with the West, in particular with France, England and Russia.

Other communities were attached to Iran or to the Ottoman Empire. However, before the creation of the Greater Lebanon in 1920, the Lebanese Communities preserved their positions in their mountains and valleys. They had their own faith, unity, identity geographical situation, and political familial leaders or notables. Indeed, it is impossible to separate the Lebanese history from that of the history of the Lebanese Mountain itself.

The Greater Lebanon of 1920 was proclaimed as a new modern state on the basis of Mount Lebanon and with enlarged territories. It included the old Mount Lebanon of the Mutassarifiyya, with the coastal cities of Beirut, Tripoli, Sidon and the Beqa' valley. The new modern state of Lebanon is the idea of the coexistence between the seventeen sects and ethnic groups in an independent state, without any foreign intervention.

**B – The modern Lebanese state preserves the strong authority of The Autonomous Lebanese Families of Notables**

Under the ottoman rule 1516 - 1914, the Lebanese districts were governed by the leaders of the great families or the notables (A'yan). The local leaders were the real Lebanese leaders on condition that they could not challenge the central ottoman authority with impunity, and had the obligation to pay taxes and tributes to the local ottoman governors or Pashas of Damascus, Tripoli, Sidon and Beirut. Theodor Hanf said that: " whether for lack of interest in direct control or because of the costs of establishing it, loyal leaders were given judicial and fiscal powers and duties. As a rule, the decisive measure for each governor was the tax revenue. The tax farmer undertook to pay the authorities a specific sum; what he collected in excess of this was his own income. He was not only responsible for certain aspects of public order, but also for the administration of larger areas, which he could release to sub - farmers. The Lebanese system of the tax - farmers was a highly pragmatic system of indirect control that ensured the state a steady income at little cost.

From the mid-nineteenth century, the Lebanese society have had many deep changes: social and economic transformations, decline in feudal economy and regime, large commercialization, urbanization, growing disparities between various Lebanese communities, and the emergence of a literate and mobile middle class. Lebanon had had a large transitional period from the feudal system of the notables or familial leaders to the democratic regime. But it was not a deep social

transformation because of the persistence of the old feudal system and of the survival of feudal and semi - feudal ties and leaders.

On the other hand, the clergy's activities in the political, intellectual and educational fields had strong social impact on the modern institutions in the contemporary Lebanon. At the same time, the real Lebanese leader was and still is a political leader who possesses firstly the support of his community. He belongs to a family of leaders. His position of leadership is frequently passed on to some of his descendants. He is not a purely political leader, because he combines in his person economic, social and political activities for his own interest.

### C - The Free Coexistence between Religious Communities and Ethnic Groups.

Despite the common notion that it is westernized, Lebanese society in reality remains a traditional one. The Family and the Community were by far the strongest of the primary units not only in the rural areas but also in the cities. Family or Community needs the support and loyalty of their members.

It defines roles and status to its various members, and constitutes a very important social unit in the life of all Lebanese people. Family and Community are by far the strongest social and traditional means to which the Lebanese individual belongs. As a result, the Lebanese people were and still motivated by two basic urges: The sectarian mind and the absolute individualism. The confessional mind shapes their thinking orders their lives and governs their relationships with others.

The political life in Lebanon was termed by the eternal conflicts between the Lebanese communities or sects and ethnic groups. The religious feeling is an important factor in the formation of the political attitude in this country. Sectarianism is the most outstanding characteristic of the Lebanese society.

It is also one of the main ills that weighs heavily on the mind and work of the Lebanese people.

Both, Christian and Moslem communities have their share of influence and play their role in the social, educational, administrative, economic and political life of the country. The basic pattern of value allocation in Lebanon has been set by the formal and informal institutionalization of sectarianism. Sectarian coalitions and friendships are presented at all social levels in Lebanon. In fact, this country is an example of a real federation of Communities in the world.

One should notice that the short period of civil war or internal conflict in Lebanon would alternate with large period of relative stability and deep harmony between communities and groups. Lebanon had the features of a fragmented nation; sharp societal divisions sustained by striking differences in religious beliefs and regional interference.

In short, Lebanon is a lonely model of coexistence in the world between many communities and ethnic groups. They formed a non-stable society, but they are still working to develop this unique model of free coexistence between several sects and different groups and cultures.

It is worth noting that in 1943 Lebanon was declared as an independent state. Bishara Kuri was nominated president with Riad Solh as Prime Minister. The principles of the Lebanese Formula were contained in the unwritten National Pact. It was an agreement between some Maronite and Sunni political leaders about the distribution of power in Lebanon and about the nature of the Lebanese identity and the Lebanese policy. Posts were distributed more equitably, and Lebanon was to remain an independent state and not be absorbed into a larger Syria or one Arab State, but it was part of the Arab world.

The National Pact represented a sort of national consensus. Its terms included: an independent state, a sovereign and neutral Lebanon in which Muslim communities neglected any idea of unity with Syria or any other Arab state; in return for Christian renunciation of separation from Arab countries or special ties with France or any foreign state. Sectarian distribution of seats in the Lebanese parliament was appointed on the basis of a six-to-five Christian - Muslim ratio; with a balanced representation in the Cabinet and the offices of the President of the Lebanese Republic, the Prime Minister, and The Speaker of the Lebanese Parliament between the Leaders of the Maronites, The Sunnis, and The Shiis.

Indeed, the contemporary Lebanon was not created by the ambition of One or Two sects. It did not belong to the Maronites and Druzes alone as was the Case of the Mutassarrifiyya in the nineteenth century. And, from 1920, the modern state of Lebanon belonged, to seventeen or more sectarian groups or sects. Some political practical formula was revised many times to be adopted with the realities of the new Lebanese society after the independence of 1943. Ethnic differences in the true sense of the word have no place in Lebanon.

Briefly, Lebanon is a country of more than seventeen religious sects or 17 feelings of communal solidarity. The fact is that, the political life in Lebanon is a perpetual entente between religious leaders whose political orientations and frames of references are basically different. The National Pact of 1943 and the Taif Agreement of 1989 not only promoted political balance the Lebanese communities and ethnic groups. Because the harmony is necessary also to practice the political democracy and the freedom of expression for the Lebanese sects and ethnic groups.

#### Religion, State and Civil War 1975 - 1990

The Independent Lebanon has often been portrayed as a religious sectarian society. But, only in modern Lebanese history, religious sectarianism has become significant in the creation of the Lebanese State.

Religion in Lebanon had become a badge of political regime. There are many considerable differences in the social structure of the seventeen Lebanese sects. Therefore, the Lebanese constitution promulgated in 1926 provided that all Lebanese citizens are equal before the law, possessed the same rights and duties, and equally admissible to all public offices, without any distinction.

Sectarianism was considered as provisional and should not detract Lebanon from being a welfare state.

In this way, after the independence in 1943, Lebanon developed the idea of Lebanese unity and Lebanese consciousness of the importance of the country as part of the Arab world. It was clear that the Arab states were interested in maintaining character of Lebanon as a center of religious freedom and the home of a national spirit.

Some Lebanese leaders suggested that civil marriage should be made obligatory to all. But the suggestion was so vehemently attacked and quickly abandoned. Lebanon is still the homeland of many free communities and ethnic groups. Lebanon is still also an Arab country seeking the beneficial advantages of the western culture.

President Fuad Shihab (1958 - 1964) undertook the reconstruction of a modern state in Lebanon, and introduced various administrative and social changes necessary for the Lebanese political system. He made deep efforts to maintain the balance between communities, regions and classes in Lebanon. But, Lebanese society is still characterized by horizontal segmentation of families and geographical distribution of the various communities. It is also segmented along a whole rank of social and political lines.

Lebanese communities are still guaranteed independent jurisdiction in the field of personal status and they maintained it ever since. The particularity of the societal structure in Lebanon must be explained by the durable relationship between Lebanese communities and groups who can be identified according to kinship, sects, regions and families.

The Lebanese political life is based on pluralistic characteristic of the geographical unity of the Lebanese territory. The fact is that, over the centuries, Lebanon preserved its pluralistic characteristics of the seventeen official sect and ethnic groups. Each of these sects still have its own structure, its own laws regarding marriage, inheritance and other matters of personal status; its own religious courts and judicial procedures; its own schools and distinct educational orientation, its own hospitals, health and social agencies. And, due to these characteristics, Lebanon had known intermittent periods of stability, as well as several periods of the long civil wars from the nineteenth century to the present day.

It is worth noting here that during the wartime, all Lebanese communities, Sects and groups entered the conflict process on the basis of preserving the fundamental principles of their own traditional characteristics. The 1943 National Pact and the 1989 Taif Agreement represented the common factors of political reconciliation between all Lebanese communities.

However, as a modern independent state with a democratic regime, Lebanon have got many kinds of parties and political groups or organizations. It has progressive, socialist, communist, national, religious parties, movement and organization's blocs, as well as ethnic and sectarian groups.

Communities have existed prior to the modern state of Lebanon. They are self-sufficient and can survive on their own. Various sectarian structures in this country originated from different sources and developed different ideologies. The National Pact is a vital mean to assure communal harmony and establish stability and peace between Lebanese communities. It is very important for the conflict regulation achievement in a deeply divided society such as Lebanon.

However, Lebanon still has a high standard of living, and is definitely one of the best Arab countries with the greatest protection of civil rights and the freedoms of worship, speech and assembly. The literacy rate stills nearly the highest in the Arab Orient.

After the long civil war of 1975 - 1989, Lebanon is trying to secure a withdrawal of the Israeli army from the areas occupied in south Lebanon, and a withdrawal of all non- Lebanese forces from other Lebanese regions. Lebanon is still an intermediary country between the East and the West. It preserved both Arab and European humanistic cultures and many languages.

Lebanese are traders and artisans. Lebanese communities lived peacefully side by side before the European interventions. Each community managed its own internal affairs and was proud its own identity and traditions. It was the warrantees of their own rights under all kind of central power.

Indeed, sectarianism is an adequate way to gather seventeen sects and groups, but it is an inadequate formula to run a modern state in Lebanon. Lebanese social life revolves around the family, and strict parental authority is still the rule in most Lebanese sects and ethnic groups. Therefor, the major figure of Lebanon after the Taif Agreement of 1989 shows that Israel has fallen in its all attempts to dominate Lebanon and to impose the Israeli Lebanese Agreement of May 17, 1983. The aim was the " total normalization " between Lebanon and Israel in many fields: a peace treaty, open border, and a trade agreement.

The implementation of this agreement should transform southern Lebanon into an Israeli security Zone.

The Lebanese denounced the agreement complaining that it infringed Lebanese sovereignty and turned Lebanon into an Israeli protectorate. They insisted that Lebanon could avoid the loss of its sovereignty only by demanding the implementation of United Nations Security Council resolutions numbers 425, 426, 508 and 509 of 1978 and 1982 which called for Israel's total and unconditional withdrawal from all Lebanese territories.

Surely, Israeli peace with Lebanon was impossible and totally unrealistic because the Israeli aim was to create the Greater Israel from the Nile to The Euphrates and to destroy the independence of Lebanon as well as other Arab Orient countries.

Indeed, the Israeli invasion failed to include Lebanon in its sphere, and to transform Lebanon as a bridge for the Israeli goods to the Arab markets. Accordingly, the militia's war has failed to divide Lebanon into sectarian mini - states in a fragmented country.

It is worth noting that the Lebanese people refused, and are still refusing, any kind of partition scheme, cantonization, federalism, and confederalism as well as a military regime.

They called for democratic reforms of the political system in Lebanon. Lebanon is a model completely different from the Israeli one. It is a model of seventeen sects and ethnic group that had lived, and are still living, together in real harmony. The Lebanese spare no effort to preserve their own model of coexistence in wartime as well as in peacetime.

#### Some concluding Remarks

The viable state of Lebanon is only a modern and democratic one that will enable to preserve the Lebanese identity, and to create a new political system, capable of saving its unique experience of multi-confessional society.

One may say that Lebanon has suffered greatly from outside interference. But, the Lebanese multi - sectarian state can provide the harmony between sects, communities and groups. It can be used as a model for the New Middle East Order. One should ask if the New World Order is interested or not in maintaining these specific characteristics of Lebanon as an international center of religious freedom and a developed home of a healthy national spirit.

The modern history of Lebanon shows that this country is the best one in all the Middle East States in maintaining the freedom of religious practice of all kind of religions. Of course, the New Middle East Order is largely interested to the model of the Lebanese secular state with modern institutions for multi-religious sects and sectarian democracy. Lebanon is still a center of freedom between religious and ethnic groups, and as a healthy national spirit of open civil society.

As a final remark, is Lebanon a viable country? This question reflects the ongoing civil wars since the beginning of the nineteenth century. Indeed,

The relation between religion and modern state was and still is the main feature of the all Middle East states that are living in deep crisis.

The continuity of the civil war in many modern Middle Eastern states came from the failure of these countries to preserve their own civil societies.

The secular vision for a viable Lebanese state insists that Lebanon should be transformed from a mosaic of religious and ethnic groups to an integrated and national society. The secularism is not only an urgent need to a viable Lebanese state but also for all pluralistic Middle East countries such as Lebanon.

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