

## European-Khaleeji Rule in Lebanon

### Hegemonic Control over Popular Lebanese Organisation<sup>1</sup>

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#### Abstract

This analysis focuses on how European nations (inclusive of the EU as a whole) and Gulf countries (inclusive of the Gulf Cooperation Council) have been exercising financial control over Lebanon's autonomy and overall functions as an independent state-entity. The analysis employs a Gramscian approach in interpreting how Lebanon's popular organisation has been eradicated by increased financial control, foreign intervention in domestic matters, as well as inhibiting the growth of healthy civil society. Based on fieldwork<sup>3</sup> in Beirut, the general discourse of this analysis gears towards a critique of the existing influences shaping Lebanese society. These external influences and the agendas they employ lead to the destruction of popular mobilisation.

#### Introduction

The Eastern Mediterranean is at the crossroads of worlds. With its growing geopolitical importance, it has become an important hub for businesses, including

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<sup>1</sup> This article features extracts of testimonies and other data part of a study used for the author's MSc Research Project. Fieldwork data was obtained in the summer of 2018.

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<sup>3</sup> Fieldwork includes recordings of the exchanges between the author and interviewees. Recordings are in the possession of the author.

those who engage in financial and foreign direct investment (FDI). Particularly in Lebanon, there is a strong interest from European countries, as well as countries in the Arabian Gulf. In Europe, the pretext is Lebanon's post-colonial dependence on France, to some extent (Kassem: 2018), as well as the closer Lebanese-EU relations that have subsequently emerged. European leaders have often visited Lebanon's elite and the establishment

On the other hand, *Khaleeji* FDI and ideological influences also shape the financial landscape and the society of Lebanon. *Khaleeji* – from the Arabic word *Khaleej*, meaning 'Gulf' – refers to the ideological export of goods and services from the Arab Gulf to other countries. At its centre, the concept implicates the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) which focuses on development, FDI, security, and energy policy, among others. These points of interest shape the political economy of its members and partners (Hanieh, 2011: 2, 82, 101). The persistent involvement of Gulf countries in other countries' economies today reflects a sad loss of autonomy and independence for the latter in multiple sectors, not least to say the financial implications, but also the political influence that institutions from Gulf exert over other governments (Bizri, 2013: 132). At its heart, the GCC follows an FDI policy that is based on Sunni Muslim values. This process is known as "Islamic Banking and Finance", which operates according to the rulings of the *Sha'aria* (Islamic law) (Khan and Bhatti: 2008).

This analysis is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Lebanon, in light of the 2015-2016 protests and the subsequent developments within civil society and social movement circles. Particularly in Lebanon, European and Khaleeji involvement has a twofold, lasting impact: (a) it jeopardises the authority of the state, religious, and financial institutions in a sectarian society, and; (b) it meddles with the functions of independent society elements and movements that seek to depart from a closed, sectarian model of politics. The analysis sheds some light over how governmental inaction due to European and Khaleeji influence has inhibited real policy-making and decision making. At the same time, it prevents any effective organisation of civil society and civic engagement. As a result, issues like political sectarianism, which dictates over Lebanon's electoral system, still persist even today. Not only that, but the rise of new actors attempting to overcome the sectarian division are effectively shut down: not only does the state act as an all-powerful hegemon, but it is itself subject to decisions made by foreign interests (Chit and Nayel: 2013).

### **Theorising Hegemony**

In Gramscian accounts, civil society organisations under a hegemonic state operate within a context of 'counter-cultural consensus' (Gramsci, 1971: 556; Della Porta 2016: 82). This means that new actors hope to challenge the established norms, beliefs, and ideas the pre-existing structure had imposed. In this case, civil society

organisations in Lebanon attempt to counter the state's normative discourse that focuses on sectarian politics. Nonetheless, the state as a hegemon is still able to control the discourse, whilst simultaneously shaping popular organisation by also controlling civil society organisations.

Unlike other accounts that primarily explore the socio-economic relations between actors, Gramsci understands civil society as a 'terrain of political struggle'. The focus is primarily at fighting capitalism at its core ideological understandings, beyond mere economic principles and paradigms (Gramsci 1971: 481). As the state exercises hegemonic control over such organisations, it controls the agenda and prevents civil society from accessing 'exclusive' zones the state has vested interests in. This requires fast action and deployment against the hegemon, though the struggle is usually successful only when strong states and weak bodies of civil society are present. On the other hand, if both the state and civil society are equally strong and organised, a gradual, 'long and difficult' struggle would be needed for the civil society elements to overcome state influence (Gramsci, 1971: 494; Ehrenberg 1999: 208-209).

This brings in Gramsci's two distinct approaches to tackling state hegemony: a 'war of manoeuvre' and a 'war of position'. A 'war of manoeuvre' involves a weak civil society, whereas a 'war of position' considers a stronger civil society (Ehrenberg 1999: 208-209). As such, a Gramscian account of hegemonic forces seeks to address the constrictive elements that define capitalism at the ideological level. Civil society

forces offer a unique opportunity: to counter-react to hegemonic control by introducing new agendas. These would subsequently trigger the necessary conditions for opportunities and possibilities for change to take place. Civil society, then, is a reaction against the hegemonic order, whereas the all-powerful hegemonic Lebanese state and its partners are receptive to capitalist rule.

Even so, the state often sets up alliances to secure its dominant status over the rest of the society. This is vital to the survival of the hegemon. As it will be examined below, this includes foreign alliances, such as the EU and Gulf countries. The continuation of existing policies block the community from identifying the real cause of the problem. Upon realising their exploitation from the status quo, a response is triggered. This process helps new actors to rise, who then often challenge the ruling hegemon. However, as the state still retains control over effective organisation, it will try to adjust civil society to its needs. By absorbing the organisational elements that seek to displace it, the state also absorbs civil society organisations into its sphere of influence (Bates 1976: 358). Even if civil society tries to overcome these impediments, it acts without realising that a new umbrella has emerged, under which civil society itself acts as an agent to the state. This is the problem with civil society organisations in Lebanon.

## Post-Colonial Influences in Lebanon

Lebanon as a society has been torn by war. Christians, Muslims, Jews, Druze and their denominations have the greatest presence in numbers in the country. Within this setting, some minorities hold a more powerful status compared to others. This is linked to the 1943 National Pact, an unwritten arrangement which discriminates in favour of certain groups (El Rajji: 2014). Following the end of the French Mandate of Lebanon, it was decided that the President would always be a Maronite Christian, the Prime Minister a Sunni Muslim, and the Speaker of the House a Shi'a Muslim (Salibi, 2002: 185). Even until now in 2018, this obsolete agreement is carried on, evident in how the last elections in May 2018 still granted the premiership to Saad Al-Hariri, despite the fact that Hezbollah as a political party had secured a majority of seats (Ajroudi: 2018).

Because of these divisions, the sectarian system in place has always benefited the elite, who sought to preserve the status quo. The European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) was introduced to Lebanon as the "EU-Lebanon Action Plan" in 2007 (European Union External Action: 2007). The proposed strategy within the document is to focus on a growing "political and economic interdependence", which essentially brings Lebanon closer to the EU, both politically, as well as economically. The EU as a bloc, then, attempts to absorb Lebanon under its own structure, in line with its political, economic, and security agendas. As a hegemonic actor, the EU strives to "exert influence on the political realities in Lebanon", and this is precisely

attempted via the ENP (Seeberg, 2009: 82). This is confirmed in the growing commitment of the EU to establish stronger links with Islamist organisations, in an attempt to push its agenda on democratic reform (Emerson and Youngs, 2007: 5). Even so, applying such a policy to Lebanon is dangerous. As mentioned, Lebanon is a sectarian society. Implementing policies as such further divide society and inhibit the cultivation of a healthy, independent civil society.

In responding to a question whether local groups and international NGOs decided to side with the government during and after the waste management crisis in Lebanon, Dr André Sleiman<sup>4</sup> reportedly stated: “Local NGOs definitely did not side with the government. For the rest, I don’t know. I know now, that the EU is pretty much doing the government’s policy, potentially, directly, knowingly or unbeknownst to them. They’re facilitating it – and UNDP as well”. The interviewee further explained that no international donor would fund a body that is by definition reactionary in nature and tries to challenge the status quo. International donors would, however, happily fund NGOs that push for social change and to improve active citizenship participation in a “civil society cloud”, as he puts it. On the other hand, when it comes to effective, immediate political change, the international community has a specific set of interests that does not wish to abandon, and that is to maintain a close relationship with the elite, to satisfy its interests:

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**Interviewer:** Do you think the EU and the UNDP are in a way sustaining the system, and therefore, preventing organisations like Beirut Madinati or others who want to achieve change?

**Dr Sleiman:** It's not a yes-or-no question. On the one hand, whenever I say - whenever anyone says - 'I'm Beirut Madinati', everybody loves us. Among - not UNDP, the UNDP are the establishment - the EU, we've talked to embassies - Germany, Canada, Britain - they all love us. They would all actually give us funds to do great projects if we were an NGO, but the moment you say you're a political movement, nobody wants to fund you anymore. I was at the EU Europe Day two months ago. The moment Saad Hariri came - by the way, he has no personal charisma - the people around him, and all the great diplomats were just angulating him - especially the European ambassador. This is what I realised, what I knew already: At the end of the day, they know how to do business with them. They fly people to vote, they are all international businessmen in the Arab world - they give security to this international community. They know they're at least there, they know how to talk to them, whereas if someone like Beirut Madinati was in power, they would not partner up. I think it's an element of instability and insecurity, like "who are these people"; the negotiations would be more uncertain, unpredictable [...] There is an agreement between the establishment and this international community. Maybe this would not have happened if people like us were in power. In a way

they're happy to fund us as an NGO, but when we come to breach this [the status quo], then no. The establishment is more secure [as an option]. It's a paradox.

The above extract clearly shows the pessimism and dissatisfaction various organisations have with the persistence of the status quo. It also hints at the good relations the Lebanese elite maintain external actors, who continuously support the preservation of the status quo. It becomes, then, rather difficult for new Lebanese local actors to emerge, especially when they seek to transform the political situation in Lebanon at a grassroots level.

### **Lebanon's Khaleeji Heritage**

During my interactions with activist groups, I interviewed Nadim Haidar, former Vice-President of the Red Oak Society at the American University of Beirut during the 2015 protests. Haidar was a student organiser at the time, who used a left-wing rhetoric to identify foreign influences in Lebanon coming in from the Gulf:

“Effectively, the state has been robbing others off power that is geared towards financialisation, that is geared towards privatisation [...] Each one [of the elite] has a loyal fascist mentality, well-linked into the capitalist class, the bourgeois economy, the Khaleeji economy; they control all the media, they control the state”.

Lebanon's Khaleeji heritage has its roots at the 1975-1990 civil war. The new economic order was set by former Prime Minister Rafiq Al-Hariri. Being half Lebanese and half Saudi, Hariri established powerful connections in the GCC and elsewhere that helped transform society. During the civil war, he contributed generously in the restoration of the Beirut's infrastructure, with "40 trucks, 100 bulldozers and 1300 workmen" (Fisk, 2001: 51, 465). Post-war, he was seen as a powerful actor contributing to the capital's and Lebanon's general development in reconstructing the country. His myriad connections, often found in the Gulf guaranteed him the prime-ministerial post, following the signing of the Ta'if Accords (Salloukh et al, 2015: 17; Masri, 2009: 235). As a result, the use of Khaleeji resources and financial capital became effectively a government priority.

The neoliberal economic policies that followed during Hariri's premiership were focusing on free market economics and expanding the business class (Baumann, 2016: 86; Balanche, 2012: 154-155). Ironically, Hariri was also branded as "Father of the Poor", despite the lack of focus on the poorer classes (Kingston, 2013: 85). This allowed legitimising such policies in the eyes of the wider public, who believed it was for the greater good, and the restoration of Lebanon after the war. These policies initiated by Hariri that can be described no other than structural adjustment have heavily impacted the growth of civil society. Some organisations have emerged, though the sustainability of these organisations and the actual impact they bring with them falls beyond direct state control. This is perfectly summarised

in Michael Lipton's work depicting Lebanon's civil society and state together as two actors operating in almost different universes: "[...] a thousand flowers blossomed, some bunched to strangle others, and the State became powerless to manage the gardens. (It later acquired, and abused, inadequate powers; but that is a different, contingent matter)" (Lipton, 1991: 26).

The GCC often uses non-Gulf countries to set up satellite economies that project its interests elsewhere. In this case, the GCC exerts influence in the Mediterranean via the Lebanese finance and banking sector. In fact, Khaleeji capital in some cases is so severe, that it often accounts for over 70% of Lebanon's total FDI revenue (Hanieh, 2011: 151, 154). IMF reports have shown that Lebanon has reproduced a system that depends on continuously expanding bank deposits, as well as the GCC economies and oil prices (Finger and Hesse, 2009: 4, 6). Moreover, the GCC economies have been involved in industrial project investment, as well as billions of dollars in real estate (Hertog, 2007: 60). This projects a 'soft' power over Lebanese decision-making, as it builds a relationship of dependence of Lebanon on countries like Qatar and Saudi Arabia for FDI (Ibid: 68).

This economic interdependence presented between Lebanon and the GCC is closely linked with the reasons as to why European countries and the EU bloc itself strive for closer cooperation with the Lebanese authorities. Similarly, the EU and Gulf countries like Saudi Arabia often engage in a mutually beneficial exchange against other forms of influences such as Iranian and Hezbollah influence (Love,

2010: 2-3). This is particular evident in an important detail mentioned in the previous section – that of preventing Hezbollah forming a government. As Hezbollah is reportedly funded by Iran, it is not in the interests of either the EU nor the GCC to allow a new actor to take over the political, economic, and security apparatus of the country. In turn, Lebanon becomes a playground for external forces, where FDI agents engage in a hegemonic war. They are allied to the elite, and effectively allow for the appropriation of the status quo.

### **Understanding the Protests and the Aftermath**

Taking into account the background in which the state was allowed to exercise direct control over societal affairs, it is important to understand why the 2015-2016 protests in Beirut failed to achieve effective political and social change. Starting in the summer of 2015, the protests first took place to address the waste mismanagement and garbage crisis. The collective first appealed to the government's lack of action and accountability in addressing the environmental issues that haunted the streets of Beirut over the disposal of waste and garbage. Although originally an appeal for environmental reasons, the protests soon were politicised and addressed specific political objectives.

The government had decided not to renew Sukleen's contract. This company was the main private entity responsible for waste collection. On top of that, it had

decided to close down Beirut's landfill areas, without any alternative means for accommodating waste. To make things worse, the country did not even have a president at the time, and only managed to settle for one towards the end of 2016 (Saab: 2016). Consequently, no garbage nor waste could be disposed. As a result, various groups took it to the streets, forming social movements in protest against the state. According to Nizar Hassan<sup>5</sup>, the movement that emerged against the regime was not necessarily politically united. Although the various groups were united in their struggle against governmental inaction, the reality of the situation differs:

“Part of these organisations usually called ‘civil society’ organisations in Lebanon are these NGOs that operate in the way of ‘flag advocacy’ usually things related to transparency or to civil rights, freedoms, public spaces, etc [...]. The things that brings them together, ideologically, are anti-corruption, anti-sectarianism – very often anti-corruption means the same as anti-cronyism, which is basically politicians using the system and the economy, the resources of the state [...] to satisfy their own private interest. This is basically the thing that they identify as their enemy [...] These people in the movement of 2015 were prominent not because they jumped in, but because a lot of them are considered the ‘activists of Beirut’ [...] they were considered the mobilisers, although outreach perhaps was very limited during these years”.

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<sup>5</sup> Former journalist at the Daily Star Lebanon, researcher at the Lebanese Centre for Policy Studies (LCPS), and political organiser

As mentioned above, the source of the issue was predominantly environmental at first, as well as a matter of welfare. Its politicisation emerged following the recognition of the deep structural conditions that solidified the impediments towards effective, grassroots social change, which converted the problem to an economic and a political dispute. “The problem of solid waste is not a technical problem, it’s not a policy problem or government problem – it’s a political problem”, says Dr André Sleiman.

Various actors were involved in the protests. Ranging from a loosely defined *Tul’it Rihetkun* (You Stink), which was the main collective that sparked the protests, other politically active groups soon got involved, including over 60 Non-Governmental Organisations focusing on the environment, *Ash-Sha’ab Yurid* (The People Want), *Badna Nahsib* (We Want Accountability), *Ash-Shara’a* (To the Streets), and *Jayi Taghyir* (Change is Coming) (Civil Society Knowledge: 2016; Kerbage, 2017: 13). Some of these groups also had party affiliations, seeking to influence the protests in a sectarian way, in order to uphold the interests of the party they represented (Ibid: 37).

Because of the ongoing influence and redirection of the movements, more secular groups and individuals were infuriated with how stagnant the situation had become. What came to be seen as an important moment for Beirut and Lebanon was losing its momentum. A new actor soon emerged from the protests. Starting off as *Beirut Madinati* (Beirut My City), this movement first established itself as a secular

group that sought to overcome the sectarian obstacles within the Lebanese society.

Dr Sleiman's words echo deeply: "If you really want to change politics, the only way is to seize the reins of power [...] The theory of change was to seize power by all means possible – of course, by all democratic means. And Beirut Madinati started like this in September [2015]".

Although Beirut Madinati lost at the establishment's traditional party elements during the 2016 municipal elections, it managed to gather a notable amount of support, which helped raise awareness over the stagnant situation, encouraging a shift towards a more secular path in Lebanese politics – or at least, that was the original plan. The problem, as reflected previously, still prevails: sectarianism is still very vibrant, and the people are still incapable of acting. Nothing has virtually changed ever since. For instance, at the time of writing, Lebanon spent about 9 months in deadlock following the May elections, before finally deciding the 'birth' of a new government on 31<sup>st</sup> January 2019 (Al Jazeera: 2019). Although people are very much aware of the political stagnation and Lebanon's past, there is a general reluctance (or at least a lack of will) to move towards a more secular direction. Consequently, civic engagement and political participation are hindered, with foreign influence exacerbating elitist rule, corruption, and political stagnation in the country.

## Conclusion

Not only do secular parties fail to gather sufficient support from the locals, but they are also often prevented from taking any action to challenge the status quo. The recorded testimonies show a rather pessimistic view of current affairs. This is attributed to the structural obstacles that maintain the status quo and sectarian politics. The European-Khaleeji model the Lebanese elite pursues firmly establishes a discourse that attempts to present a case of prosperity and welfare for the rest of society, it largely has no positive contribution to no one else other than those benefiting from this European-Khaleeji rule. No matter the action taken by independent groups, free from sectarian ties and identity, it still remains rather difficult to break away from the ongoing deadlock.

The 2015-2016 protests did little to account for governmental inaction to begin with. At the same time, the state itself reinforces these restrictions, as it suits its own elitist strategy, at the expense of the rest of the society. Unfortunately, Lebanon continues to follow a path of sectarianism that inhibits the growth of its people's intellectual freedom and liberty. The presence of civil society does not help that much, since groups as such often misread the situation in thinking that expert and technical know-how will help overcome sectarianism. In reality, had the protests sustained a focus away from sectarianism, the situation would have been much different than what it is today.

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