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To cite this article: Abbas Assi & James Worrall (2015) Stable instability: the Syrian conflict and the postponement of the 2013 Lebanese parliamentary elections, Third World Quarterly, 36:10, 1944-1967, DOI: [10.1080/01436597.2015.1071661](https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2015.1071661)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2015.1071661>



Published online: 23 Sep 2015.



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Stable instability: the Syrian conflict and the postponement of the 2013 Lebanese parliamentary elections

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(Received 1 May 2015; accepted 8 July 2015)

Given the morass of the Syrian civil war and Lebanon's exposure to the consequences, this article seeks to explore how the intersecting dynamics of Lebanese domestic conflicts and the multiple implications of the bloodbath in Syria have influenced the behaviour of Lebanese political parties in their ongoing struggle over the formulation of a new electoral law, leading to a broad consensus among the country's parties to postpone the 2013 parliamentary elections. The article argues that, while the usual attempts to profit at the expense of other groups in society are still present and external patrons still wield great influence, the decision to postpone the elections also demonstrates a degree of pragmatism and political development since, despite dire predictions to the contrary, Lebanon has not succumbed to the return of its own civil war. Instead a complex mixture of pragmatism, elision of interests and external influence, combined with local agency, has led Lebanon into a situation of stable instability.

Keywords: Lebanon; elections; Arab Spring; participation and power; democratisation; political parties

Introduction

Lebanese political parties have, naturally enough, always tried to formulate electoral laws that increase the likelihood of their own victory in parliamentary elections. Often this enhances political and sectarian tensions, resulting in political deadlock. This article sets out both to explore the current impasse over a new electoral law, which led to the current postponement of the 2013 parliamentary elections, and to examine what this tells us about Lebanon in the face of the Syrian crisis. The elections, originally scheduled to take place in June 2013, were initially rescheduled for November 2014 and subsequently further deferred until 2017.

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Given the politics of electoral law, the penetration of Lebanon by regional and overseas actors, the fractured nature of Lebanese politics and the ongoing Syrian civil war, the fact that the postponement of the parliamentary elections came about, and that there was an unusually high level of consensus on postponement raises important questions about the nature of Lebanese politics at this juncture of the country's political development. The article leverages its analysis of how disagreement over the electoral law led to the postponement of the elections, in order to investigate how the Syrian conflict has interacted with pressures from above, below and between Lebanese political parties, enabling Lebanon, thus far, to avoid the fate of a return to civil war caused by the political, economic and humanitarian consequences of the Syrian conflict. Indeed, Lebanon has instead, as is in part evidenced by the very postponement of the elections, entered into a form of stable instability in which the political parties have an interest in avoiding escalation and in maintaining the country's stability. The article focuses on the role of Lebanese political parties both because they remain dominant actors and because they are subject to a range of pressures which they must take into account when making decisions.

While the article does not expressly argue against the traditional narrative of Lebanese political volatility, confessionalism and external penetration, it does suggest that this narrative can be overlaid and that there is the possibility of an elision of interests, political pragmatism and greater agency for local players than more 'structural' accounts of Lebanese politics allow.¹ Here, recognition of elements of validity of this structural analysis, coupled with awareness of its weaknesses, allows for the analysis to be supplemented with insights from securitisation theory; more specifically it allows for the development of the concept of the 'elision of interests', to allow us to see beyond predictable 'input-output' scenarios into societal and elite agency, which works both through and around these structures.

The article thus makes a conscious decision to highlight reasons why the Lebanese political parties might have more agency to decide their own future than is often perceived, and that common interests, a desire to avoid a return to the horrors of the civil war and an improved sense of growing Lebanese identity have a role to play in the decision making of sectarian leaders, alongside the usual explanations provided by a structural understanding of confessional politics.

In order to explore this complex mix of factors, the concept of the 'elision of interests' is employed. While there may be an element of *coincidence* of interests at play, which is accidental and unexpected, leading to the spectre of uncommon bedfellows, this is too simplistic a notion in its own right to explain what is happening in Lebanon, both in terms of the complexity of alliances and obligations, and in terms of other factors at play which are more hidden. Certainly the analysis below suggests that there is an element of coincidence within the elision of interests but this denies vision and agency to both political leaders and Lebanese voters.

The outcomes of the inability to decide on a new electoral law and the continuation of the current power-sharing structure is mirrored in the inability to elect a new president, and as a compromise to vest presidential powers with the prime minister, whose own election to that position was, in an interesting

parallel, reached through an overwhelming consensus in parliament. This suggests that all parties have a strong elision of interests, made up of a number of factors, in maintaining some level of stability. In this context stability is taken simply to mean situations where ‘stresses or shocks do not tend to produce large, irreversible changes. This does not mean the system does not react when subjected to stress or shock...Stability means that the reaction is one of a limited, and perhaps predictable nature and that the changes are not irreversible, or lead to a new balance not essentially different from the original.’² This definition of stability is useful here because it acknowledges that stability is not an absolute condition but something that is flexible on the surface while retaining the core of the underlying system. In studying Lebanon it is easy to be distracted by rhetoric and the seemingly chaotic nature of its politics, missing the stable nature of its instability.

In order to explore these issues, the article begins by briefly explaining the Lebanese consociational system, which is traditionally seen as shaping the behaviour of political parties. It then explores the recent history of Lebanese electoral law and attempts to reform it. Combined, these two sections outline the crucial backdrop against which events unfold. The paper then examines the domestic, inter- and intra-sectarian disputes over electoral law in Lebanon, followed by the multiple implications of the Syrian conflict. Clearly the intersection of inter- and intra-sectarian disputes with the implications of the Syrian conflict contributed to the failure of Lebanese political parties to agree on a new electoral law. How this translated into the postponement of the parliamentary elections is explored next. This discussion is framed through the concept of the prism of the ‘elision of interests’, outlined above, with additional reference to factors neglected in the usual analysis of outside-in and sectarian influences on Lebanon, in order to provide a further dimension to the ‘elision of interests’ seen in Lebanon.

Finally, the conclusion briefly addresses the implications of the decision to postpone the elections, alongside analysis of what all this may tell us about a Lebanon which has, so far at least, been able to confound those who confidently predicted that it would not be able to prevent a return to its civil war past, through the vortex of Syria’s civil war present.

The ‘consociational system’: explaining the behaviour of Lebanon’s political parties

The behaviour of Lebanese political parties is often shaped by the intersection of three main factors: intra and inter-sectarian conflicts and external influences, either through external alliances with other countries or as a result of regional events. The influence of these three factors on Lebanese politics is frequently explained by the existence of a consociational form of government.³ This form of political structure, as conceptualised by Arend Lijphart, is ‘government by elite cartel designed to turn a democracy with a fragmented political culture into a stable democracy’.⁴ It seeks to neutralise ‘the destabilizing effects of subcultural segmentation...at the elite level by embracing non-majoritarian mechanisms for conflict resolution’.⁵ The Lebanese consociational reality has often not met these goals, despite safeguards to ensure the distribution of key positions

according to religious sect. The system extends throughout the state through formal written processes and informal agreements and turn-taking.⁶

This distribution of state positions has naturally contributed to the emergence of sectarian political parties and elites that seek to represent their communal groups in the consociational system.⁷ Kanchan Chandra argues that 'the politicization of ethnic divisions inevitably gives rise to one or more ethnic parties. In turn, the emergence of even a single ethnic party "infects" the rest of the party system, leading to a spiral of extreme ethnic bids that destroy competitive politics altogether.'⁸ This in turn is seen as inevitably leading to sectional interests trumping the national interest.⁹

As a consequence of the politicisation of sectarian divisions, Lebanese political parties, which are mainly based on religious sect, are forced to mobilise the support of their sect to be able to win in parliamentary elections. In terms of parliament, with its 50:50 distribution of seats between Muslims and Christians as broader religious groupings,¹⁰ this adds an extra dimension of intra-sectarian tension between different parties representing the same or different sects within the simple division of Christians and Muslims. As Lebanese journalist and writer, Fidaa Itani, argues, 'the fear of the other forces [the citizen] to re-elect this political class'.¹¹ As a result, sectarian language is deployed extensively in speeches and party statements, which often emphasise a party's unique ability to maximise the sect's interests. This discourse frequently leads to attempts to securitise issues (such as electoral law).¹²

Ultimately, as Diamond and Gunther put it, 'the electoral logic of the ethnic party is to harden and mobilise its ethnic base with exclusive, often polarizing appeals to ethnic group opportunity and threat'.¹³ This also means that the representatives of communal groups are often entangled as much in intra-sectarian competition and conflict over the leadership of their respective sects as they are with opposing sects.

Despite these processes, endeavours to strengthen a party's position within its sect are not sufficient to secure victory in parliamentary elections. The distribution of sectarian groups across electoral districts also imposes the need to form inter-sectarian alliances to secure victory. 'Cross-communal cooperation is essential to obtaining substantial power in Lebanon since all the sectarian groups are political minorities and cannot become a political majority without making coalitions with other groups.'¹⁴ These alliances have ramifications, with political parties often having to make concessions to allies from opposing sects both to secure the persistence of the alliance and to profit in other areas of negotiation, especially in terms of delivering on promises made to constituents. These concessions involve, for instance, relinquishing a parliamentary seat in a certain electoral district or a cabinet post to their allies. This is both necessary and dangerous as it can lead to rival intra-sectarian parties presenting these deals as deleterious to the longer-term interests of the sect.

External factors also influence the behaviour of Lebanese political parties. The external alliances of domestic parties with foreign patrons, as well as regional and international developments that might influence the political positions of their foreign patrons (and themselves), or those of their domestic opponents, can feed into the system rapidly. Under the consociational system there is a special motivation to seek foreign support to bolster domestic

positions. Lebanese scholar Bassel Salloukh argues that ‘the way the country is exposed to external intervention has to [do] with the behaviour of the internal actors’.¹⁵

Foreign support for Lebanese parties usually involves financial contributions and political support via international or regional institutions, such as supporting the passage of UN Security Council resolutions that target domestic opponents or their external allies. The sectarian communities ‘are compelled by the situation to act as if they were states in an international environment’,¹⁶ since each party seeks external backing to bolster its position against its domestic opponents. These external factors often have implications for the behaviour of Lebanese political parties. For instance, external alliances usually entail the heavy influence of foreign patrons on the political positions of domestic parties. They may also capitalise on regional and international developments that undermine the position of their domestic opponents’ foreign allies.

These three levels of analysis, when viewed through the prism of the consociational system, provide a useful frame for examining the interaction of influences which shape Lebanese political parties’ perception of their interests. The problem with this approach, however, is that it can often lead to a focus on competition, leading to a tendency to examine points of tension and contestation rather than points of agreement, conciliation and concession. While it is true that the 2013 parliamentary elections were postponed because of the difficulty of finding a solution acceptable to all in terms of a redrafted electoral law, what is equally interesting is that it was essentially a joint decision to choose the postponement of the elections. This suggests not only that the Lebanese political parties were prepared to put up with the continuation of the outcome of the 2008 Doha Agreement but that, given the situation in Syria and the political tensions created by the negotiations over electoral law, choosing to postpone the elections marks an elision of interests. Compared to the past, when these debates would escalate, ultimately resulting in violence,¹⁷ what results instead today appears to be much more pragmatic.

Exploring Lebanese electoral law and the process of reform

The Lebanese constitution calls for the formulation of an electoral law based on large provinces with the aim of formulating multi-sectarian electoral districts. The idea behind this is that candidates standing for election in mixed-sectarian districts will be forced to adopt a national-level discourse and political platform to be able to mobilise voters from different communal groups. Needless to say, neither the spirit nor the letter of the constitution is truly followed when it comes to electoral law.

Electoral law is an essential instrument for the political survival of Lebanon’s sectarian political parties. The formulation of electoral laws based on small districts dominated by one communal group secured the political parties’ ability to influence the formulation of electoral lists in their districts. If the main sect in the district is represented by one main party, candidates who represent the minorities in the district are forced to weave alliances with the party of the main sect to secure their inclusion. For instance, Christian politicians standing for election in districts where their community is a minority, such as the northern

and southern districts, have to build alliances with the main parties that represent the major sects in these districts. This enables the main parties in these districts to extract concessions from candidates representing minorities. In his analysis of the electoral laws in Lebanon, Bassel Salloukh argues that 'none of the post-war electoral systems created genuinely heterogeneous territorial constituencies with incentives for moderation-serving inter-ethnic vote pooling. Instead, the electoral districts in all postwar elections have been purposefully gerrymandered to favour one political leader or another.'¹⁸

Two common features have marked electoral laws adopted since the end of the civil war. The first is the continuing difficulty for political parties to agree the format of electoral law. Deals on electoral law have frequently required the intervention of external players before a workable solution has been found. These 'solutions' are generally based not on a long-term resolution of the problem but on a short-term quick fix which leaves one or more groupings with a vested interest in further change. The second characteristic of these short-term fixes is that they are based on a winner-takes-all system, which makes minorities unhappy because they are then unable to have a significant influence on either the result or on the selection of their parliamentary candidates. This is especially the case for Christians, who are distributed widely across a number of electoral districts. When it came to negotiating a new electoral law for the 2013 parliamentary elections, once again the parties had difficulty in reaching an agreement, and this time there appeared to be little appetite among external powers to attempt to broker an agreement on a new electoral law.¹⁹ This lacuna eventually forced the Lebanese political parties to find their own solution.

At this juncture it is useful to briefly examine how electoral law has traditionally been a key element which has been manipulated by external powers, in conjunction with their domestic allies. This was especially the case during the Syrian military presence in Lebanon, which lasted from 1990 until the 'Cedar Revolution' in 2005, which led to overt Syrian withdrawal. During this period electoral laws pertaining to the 1992, 1996 and 2000 parliamentary elections were all carefully formulated in order to secure the victory of Damascus' allies in Lebanon.²⁰

Electoral districts for the 1992 elections were divided to exclude anti-Syrian groups, in particular Christians. The electoral districts of the North, the South and Beirut were represented by 28, 23 and 19 MPs, respectively, while the main Christian districts of Jbeil, Kisirwan and Baabda were represented by three, five and six MPs, respectively.²¹ This electoral law led to a Christian boycott,²² which, among other factors, resulted in a turnout of a mere 30%, the lowest in Lebanon's history.²³ Theodor Hanf argues that 'the new electoral law constituted a complete break with the Taif Agreement. Conceived primarily as an instrument to safeguard and consolidate a pro-Syrian policy, it profoundly disturbed the equilibrium between Christians and Muslims.'²⁴

For the 1996 elections the 1992 electoral law was adopted with one major amendment. The three districts of the Bekaa Valley (North Bekaa, Zahle and West Bekaa) were combined into one main district. The aim was again to weaken the Christian vote, as Christians are mainly concentrated in Zahle, while other districts in the Bekaa Valley are overwhelmingly Muslim. It can be no coincidence that this change occurred after several Christian leaders decided to

participate in the elections, realising that a Christian boycott would not lead to Syrian withdrawal.²⁵

In a similar vein the electoral law of 2000 was formulated by Major General Jamil al-Sayyed (1998–2005), then Director of Lebanon's General Security Apparatus, who played a role in producing the draft law in coordination with the Syrian authorities at Anjar, the headquarters of Syrian intelligence in Lebanon.²⁶ In turn, the elections of 2005 were also held according to the 2000 electoral law,²⁷ although it did not provide a fair representation of the Lebanese people.²⁸

The 2009 parliamentary elections marked a greater change. However, Lebanon's political class was unable to agree on a new law and required foreign mediation. This was in part because of the violent conflict that erupted on 7 May 2008 between Lebanese political parties, which demonstrated Hizbollah's continuing strength and the inability of the other parties to fully counter this. This violence also forced outside powers to become more involved to damp down tensions and facilitate dialogue. By this time Syria's monopoly over Lebanon was clearly eroded and Saudi Arabia and Qatar became closely involved in brokering the power-sharing agreement which followed.²⁹ The agreement also led to a new electoral law based on small districts (*Qada'*), with a winner-takes-all system.³⁰ The events of 2008–09 not only demonstrate the continuing volatility of Lebanese politics and the Cedar Republic's continued penetration by external powers but also reveal the difficulties and dangers of settling the rules under which elections in Lebanon can be held. This is especially so, given the finely balanced nature of Lebanese politics and the way in which the system in Lebanon is now divided into two coalitions.

Since 2005 the conflict that has erupted between Hizbollah and the largely Sunni Future Movement over key issues, such as the legitimacy of Hizbollah's armed wing and the status of diplomatic relations with Syria, has fuelled the deep Sunni–Shi'a division which now characterises both Lebanon and much of the wider region today. This split has also manifested itself in the creation of the two major coalitions which are headed mainly by those two parties – the March 8 and March 14 Alliances, respectively.³¹

The crystallisation of Lebanese politics into these two competing blocs, which are often characterised as being either pro- or anti-Syria, is the usual frame through which most analysis of Lebanon proceeds. What the blocs and their composition highlight is the extreme polarisation of Sunni and Shi'a in Lebanon, with very few Sunni-based parties participating in the March 8 bloc and vice versa,³² while also emphasising the highly fragmented nature of Christian politics in Lebanon. The tendency to think in terms of these two blocs, however, disguises some of the changes to their composition which have come about since their initial formation, as well as the continuing desire of each individual political party to try to maximise its chances at any election.

Political parties' positions on a new electoral law

Such is the tension surrounding electoral law in Lebanon that discussions between Lebanese political parties over the formulation of a new electoral law to replace that adopted for the 2009 elections were initiated just a few months before the specified deadline for the polls to take place in June 2013. Parties

backing the March 8 coalition were especially keen to see a new electoral law because, despite securing cabinet representation and a veto power over cabinet decisions, they had lost in the 2009 parliamentary elections, in which the March 14 coalition had received 71 seats and 44.5% of the vote, whereas the March 8 bloc had only received 57 seats on a higher share of the vote at 55.5%.³³ Naturally it was the Christian parties across the 8 vs. 14 divide who most desired a new electoral law.

Several electoral laws were proposed by the political parties to replace the existing 2009 law, yet only one of these, the so-called 'Orthodox Gathering' electoral law, was submitted to Parliament for debate and consideration. Embryonic electoral laws proposed by the Future Movement and the Lebanese Forces Party (LFP) were both based on a hybrid system, which mixed in various ways both majoritarian and proportional representation (PR) systems. Meanwhile, Hizbollah proposed an electoral law based on PR with large provinces as electoral districts, which would clearly have been to its benefit. These other proposed laws were not submitted to Parliament, however, because it was clear that they did not enjoy sufficient support.

The 'Orthodox Gathering' law was proposed by Lebanese Orthodox elites and supported by the major Christian parties.³⁴ The proposed law received support throughout from the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) and the *el-Marada* and *Kataeb* parties, while the LFP initially supported the law and later changed its position. The law proposed that each sectarian community has the right to elect its MPs based on PR, with Lebanon as one electoral district. The aim was to improve Christian representation in the political system, since, if adopted, it would secure the election of all MPs allocated to the Christian community by Christian voters.³⁵ The proposed law would therefore remove Christian voters from the influence of Sunni, Shi'a and Druze political parties.

The 'Orthodox Gathering' electoral law was put before Parliament and enjoyed the support of the March 8 coalition (including Hizbollah), as well as the LFP and the *Kataeb* party from the March 14 coalition. Parliamentary arithmetic shows that, had there been a vote on this electoral law, it would have passed in Parliament, despite the Future Movement and Progressive Socialist Party's (PSP) opposition. The law was scuppered when the LFP and its March 14 coalition allies failed to attend parliament when it convened to vote, meaning the law fell for lack of quorum, leaving the 2009 electoral law intact which, according to Abdo Saad, allows Sunnis and Shi'as to elect 75% and 70% of their MPs, respectively, while Christians are able to elect only 26% of their MPs.³⁶

Intra-sectarian competition among the predominantly Maronite political parties for the support of their community led the FPM, *el-Marada* and *Kataeb* to favour the 'Orthodox Gathering' electoral law.³⁷ The basis of FPM and *el-Marada* support for the law was threefold. First, it would improve Christian representation in the political system, by removing Christian voters from Muslim parties' sphere of influence; second, it would be likely to increase the sectarian leadership of these parties; and, third, it would secure the victory of the March 8 coalition with a majority of parliamentary seats.³⁸ The LFP, which initially advocated the law, and *Kataeb*, which continued to support it, were clearly motivated by the fear that rejection of the law would lead to them being accused

of undermining their community's interests in the political system, thus damaging their electoral chances. Both parties appeared willing to risk the March 14 coalition losing the parliamentary elections. As Elie Hajj puts it, 'the two March 14 Christian parties (LFP and *Kataeb*) made that decision thinking that if the Christian vote is not "liberated" in the upcoming June elections, the March 14 alliance will be massacred at the polls [anyway] because of the harsh feelings stirred up among the Christians by the head of the Free Patriotic Movement Gen. Michel Aoun and the Maronite Church, headed by Cardinal Bechara Rahi'.³⁹

At this point, then, it is worth attempting to analyse why, despite these pressures, the LFP came to alter its position and withdrew its support for the 'Orthodox Gathering' electoral law when Parliament convened to vote on it on 15 May. According to Michel Aoun, head of the FPM, the dominant Maronite party, and a major player in the March 8 coalition, the LFP changed position because the Future Movement offered to nominate the LFP leader, Samir Geagea, as its candidate for the presidency, which was due to be decided in 2014,⁴⁰ as well as to grant the LFP more seats in the March 14 coalition parliamentary bloc in the next elections.⁴¹ The Future Movement's offer thus served to offset the likely loss of LFP seats in Christian-dominated districts after it took the decision to turn against the 'Orthodox Gathering' electoral law. Geagea himself justified his party's change, stating that 'the priority of the LFP has always been on [sic] securing a voting system that enjoys national backing in order to replace the current legislation governing the polls'.⁴²

Despite being on the other side of the 'March Divide', the FPM accused the LFP of selling out the Christian community's interests to satisfy its inter-sectarian allies, namely the Future Movement. The FPM framed the LFP refusal to vote for the 'Orthodox Gathering' electoral law as undermining the position of the Christians in the consociational system, portraying the LFP's position as a '*coup d'état*' against the Christians and accusing it of treachery.⁴³ This is because the main Christian parties (FPM, LFP, *el-Marada* and *Kataeb*) had reached an agreement under the auspices of the Maronite Patriarch, Bechara Boutros al-Rahi, on supporting the 'Orthodox Gathering' electoral law.⁴⁴ The former Deputy Speaker of Parliament and head of the Orthodox Gathering, Elie Ferzli, argues that the refusal of the LFP to support the proposed law made it lose some of its popularity within its community.⁴⁵

The Syrian conflict and Lebanon's political parties

The Syrian conflict has clearly had repercussions for the behaviour of the political parties and contributed to their positions on the formulation of a new electoral law and the postponement of the parliamentary elections in 2013. Officially the Lebanese government has 'dissociated' itself from the conflict in Syria and does not support either side. Despite this, Sunni, Shi'a, Druze and Christian parties have all tried to capitalise on the conflict to improve their domestic positions.

The Syrian conflict presented an opportunity for Sunni parties, such as the Future Movement and *al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya*,⁴⁶ to weaken the influence of the Asad regime in Lebanon and to undermine Hizbollah's political and military power, perhaps even removing its ability to veto cabinet decisions.⁴⁷

As Paul Salem explains, the ‘Sunnis in Lebanon feel increasingly marginalized and humiliated by an all-powerful Hezbollah. They saw the uprising in Syria as an opportunity...to bring down a regional power that stood behind Hezbollah’s power in Lebanon.’⁴⁸

Moreover, attempts by other Sunni parties, in particular the Salafi groups and *al-Jama‘a al-Islamiyya*, at intra-sectarian outbidding motivated the Future Movement to adopt a more critical discourse against the Syrian regime and to employ sectarian language so as to be able to mobilise popular support, especially after the rise of Salafi groups in northern Lebanon,⁴⁹ which usually employ extensively sectarian language.⁵⁰ The clashes between the Lebanese army and pro-Syrian opposition militants in Aarsal in 2013 provide a telling example of how the Future Movement seeks to show its support for the Syrian opposition fighters so as to mobilise Sunnis in Lebanon.⁵¹ Mohammed Kabbara, an MP in the Future Movement parliamentary bloc, warned the Lebanese state against targeting areas supporting the Syrian opposition in Lebanon, stating that ‘if Aarsal is besieged, we will besiege the whole country and we call to punish all those responsible for the killing of our Sunni people in Lebanon’.⁵²

At the opposite end of the spectrum Hezbollah, unsurprisingly, considers the Syrian conflict a plot to topple the regime in Damascus and disarm the ‘Resistance’. In a speech in 2011 the leader of Hezbollah, Hassan Nasrallah, justified his party’s support for the regime in Damascus by stating that:

We are with the reform in Syria, and we stand with a regime which... supported the resistance movements, and we say yes to address all the causes and manifestations of corruption or defects, yes to all reforms which in fact have been accepted by the Syrian leadership and advocated by the Syrian people. But there are those who do not want reforms in Syria, no security, no stability, no civil peace, [and] no dialogue. There are those who want to destroy Syria.⁵³

Since 2011 Hezbollah has inexorably become militarily involved in Syria. It justifies this in part through attacks by Syrian opposition groups on Shi’a villages located on the Lebanese–Syrian border in the northern Bekaa. This was initially used by Hezbollah to initiate military support for the inhabitants of these villages but then morphed into direct military assistance in aiding the Assad regime, resulting in Hezbollah support for the regime’s assault on Qusayr city, which eventually led to the conquest of the city in June 2013.⁵⁴ In one of his speeches, Nasrallah justified his party’s military intervention by stating that ‘Takfiri groups’ [i.e. extreme militant groups] control over Syria and especially in border areas with Lebanon poses a great danger for the Lebanese Muslims as well as Christians...If Syria falls in the hands of the Takfiris and the US, the resistance will be trapped and “Israel” will enter Lebanon. If Syria falls, the Palestinian cause will be lost.’⁵⁵ It is interesting to note that Nasrallah has attempted to mitigate the implications of Hezbollah’s actions in Syria for domestic Sunni–Shi’a relations, stating ‘we do not evaluate matters from a Sunni or Shiite perspective, but from a perspective joining all Muslims and Christians together, since they are all threatened by this Takfiri plot financed by the US’.⁵⁶

While the positions of the main parties of the Sunni and Shi’a communities are clear on the Syrian conflict, the Druze and Christian parties have, in contrast, been deeply divided on this issue. The Druze community is divided

between the PSP, which called on the Druze of Syria to join the Syrian opposition, and the Lebanese Democratic Party (LDP), which expressed its support for the regime in Damascus. The PSP MP Akram Shouhayib justified his party's position, stating that it is not acceptable for the 'Druze to stand with the [Asad] regime against the revolution of [the Syrian] people, and to be a tool for the suppression of their fellow Syrians...Therefore it was our duty to call on them to join the revolution alongside their brothers who are struggling to reach a democratic Syria.'⁵⁷ PSP support for the Syrian opposition might be cloaked in high-minded rhetoric (and a degree of fear of the long-term implications of the Syrian conflict) but it conceals two further motivations. The first of these is an element of revenge, since the Syrian regime stands accused of assassinating Kamal Jumblatt, the father of its current leader, Walid, during the civil war. The second is cold political calculation, in seeking to strengthen its external alliances with states that support the Syrian opposition. This was especially the case given Riyadh's termination of its relations with the PSP after its withdrawal from the coalition brought down the March 14 government and led to the replacement of Saudi Arabia's key ally, Saad Hariri, as prime minister in 2011.⁵⁸ In any post-Asad Syria the influence of Saudi Arabia would be increased and the PSP's position in Lebanon would only be enhanced in this scenario.⁵⁹

The LDP MP Fadi al-Awar stated that 'the position of the Druze of Lebanon stems from the position of Syrian Druze who are supporters of the Syrian regime and its president, and they cannot stand with the Salafi forces that are killing the people in the name of the revolution'.⁶⁰ The LDP's support for the Syrian regime was rather unsurprising, given that the LDP has less freedom of movement than the PSP, having made Hizbollah its main inter-sectarian ally. LDP influence would clearly be diminished by Hizbollah's weakness if Asad were to fall.

Intra-sectarian rivalry over the Syrian conflict was even more intense within the Christian community. The FPM and the LFP provided very different interpretations of the Syrian conflict, reflective of the broad stances of the March 8 and 14 coalitions.

Both sides' rhetoric, naturally enough, appealed to wider discourses rather than to prosaic advantages in justifying their support for, or opposition to, the Asad regime. The FPM based its argument on fear and played on the same themes as Nasrallah. In its eyes Asad's fall would allow the Muslim Brotherhood to take power and form their own 'Islamic state', which might treat the Christians as *Dhimmīs* (second-class citizens). This viewpoint has only been enhanced by attacks against Coptic Christians in Egypt and the rise of groups like Daesh, the so-called Islamic State, in Syria and Iraq, with attendant evidence of widespread mistreatment of Christians and attempted genocide against the Yezidis in 2014.⁶¹

The LFP, on the other hand, justified its support of the Syrian opposition with a message of hope rather than fear. In a television interview its leader, Samir Geagea, called on Christians in Syria 'not to be afraid [of extremism] and to seek to achieve what they believe in and in particular justice and freedom and democracy and equality and a true citizenship. This is the only exit for their salvation and not to be protected by dictatorial regimes.'⁶² Geagea stated that

the Syrian regime was responsible for harming 'Christians not only in Syria [but] in Syria *and* in Lebanon'.⁶³ The LFP even went as far as supporting the Muslim Brotherhood's ascendancy to power in Syria to replace the current regime.⁶⁴ Like Walid Jumblatt, however, Geagea had good reason for his dislike of the Asad regime as, during the Syrian military presence in Lebanon, Damascus weakened and marginalised the Christian community in the political system, and held Geagea from 1994 to 2005 in solitary confinement beneath the Ministry of Defence in Beirut, in large part seemingly because of his opposition to the Syrian military presence.⁶⁵

The FPM has seemingly profited most from the Syrian conflict. Its message of fear naturally plays better than one of hope among Christians and attempts to securitise the Syrian refugee issue in Lebanon and the grievances of Christians in Syria to mobilise the political support of Christians have far more resonance in the community. According to the FPM Minister of Interior, Marwan Charbel (2011–13), the number of Syrian refugees in Lebanon stood at about 1,200,000 in mid-2013 (including Palestinians fleeing from Syria).⁶⁶ The FPM has consistently called for the closure of Lebanon's borders to more refugees,⁶⁷ eventually getting its way in October 2014.⁶⁸ The then FPM Minister of Energy and Water, and from January 2014 Minister of Foreign Affairs and Emigrants, Gebran Bassil, consistently called for the Lebanese–Syrian borders to be closed in order to block the flow of refugees, citing the economic burden.⁶⁹

The Lebanese journalist Jean Aziz, who is close to the FPM, argues that the Syrian refugee problem is not about crime waves or other normal concerns overt refugees 'but [about] the existence of organized armed groups'.⁷⁰ These fears have been exacerbated by the success of extremist groups in Syria, which have tortured many Syrian Christians and destroyed a number of churches. Having established widespread popularity among Christians because of their stance on the 'Orthodox Gathering' electoral law reform, the FPM has been able to further extend its lead by exploiting the politics of fear with reference to Syria and to Syrian refugees in Lebanon. Needless to say, having such a strong lead among Christians meant that the FPM was the most vociferous opponent of any postponement of the Lebanese parliamentary elections.

The intersection of the Syrian conflict and inter-sectarian conflicts led the FPM to support the so-called 'Orthodox Gathering' electoral law. The current electoral law of 2009 gives the Future Movement a large parliamentary bloc, although about half of its MPs are non-Sunnis. Thus, one of the factors that drew Christian parties to the proposed law was that it would reduce the number of Future Movement MPs and consequently undermine its influence on domestic politics. This is connected to wider fears that the rise of Sunni leadership in Syria would embolden and strengthen the domestic position of the Sunni community in Lebanon.⁷¹ This might lead to its hegemony over the political system and the marginalisation of the Christian community. Farid el-Khazen of the FPM expressed his party's concern about the rise of a Sunni leadership in Syria. He argued that the Syrian civil war 'played a role in supporting any [electoral law] proposal that enhances the protection of the Christians', especially after the rise of extremist groups in Syria which targeted them.⁷²

The elision of interests and the postponement of the 2013 (and 2014) parliamentary elections

As a result of its support for the ‘Orthodox Gathering’ electoral law, the FPM saw a surge in its popularity, a shift which was threatening to the LFP, *Kataeb*, the Future Movement and the PSP. It was feared that the FPM’s popularity would allow it to win the vast majority of Christian seats in Parliament and declare itself the main leader of the Christian community, dramatically improving Aoun’s chances of being elected president, while securing March 8 victory.

The inability of Lebanese political parties to reach an agreement on the electoral law did not lead to conflict; instead, all the main parties (*Kataeb*, the Future Movement,⁷³ the PSP, the LFP, *el-Marada*, Hizbollah and the Amal Movement), supported the constitutional amendment to extend the term of Parliament for 18 months, until November 2014⁷⁴ – the FPM was the only exception. Thus a remarkable elision of interests, across sectarian, intra-sectarian and March 8 and 14 lines, occurred.

The FPM was in the slightly contradictory position of wanting electoral reform while at the same time having a vested interest in the elections going ahead even under the 2009 law. As one FPM MP pointed out, the LFP, PSP, Future Movement and *Kataeb*’s decision to postpone the elections ‘stems from the fear of...a new tsunami for Michel Aoun if elections were held according to any [electoral] law’ – this despite the fact that the FPM was already the largest Christian party in parliament.⁷⁵ The former Lebanese ambassador to the USA, Abdullah Abu-Habib, emphasises these divisions:

The Lebanese Forces Party implicitly favors extension because it wants to give its supporters enough time to digest its flip-flopping from being a proponent to an opponent of the Orthodox Gathering Law... In contrast, Gen Michel Aoun maintained his call for elections to be held on time, in order to safeguard currently applicable laws, while hoping that his staunch support for the Orthodox Gathering Law would result in an electoral tsunami similar to the one he enjoyed in 2005.⁷⁶

The mainly Druze PSP, led by Walid Jumblatt, also had a strong interest in postponing the elections. The size of its parliamentary bloc allowed it to exploit the conflict between the two coalitions, especially after it formally left the March 14 coalition in 2009.⁷⁷ Naturally, it expects both coalitions will seek to undermine its endeavour to win a large parliamentary bloc because of its ability to ‘black-mail’ them. The PSP therefore ‘endorses extending parliament’s term because it wants to retain its role as a political linchpin. This role allows the Druze to switch sides while maintaining the balance of power necessary to safeguard the perpetuation of that role.’⁷⁸ This position also ensures influence in the horse-trading around the election of the next president, who can currently appoint three cabinet posts himself, and gives it more influence than its LDP rivals can expect.

The Future Movement, while worried about the increase in the FPM’s popularity, was also concerned about the rise of the popularity of Salafist groups which threatened to undermine its own Sunni support base. If the Salafi groups, with their focus on Syria, Sunni vulnerability in Lebanon and ‘defending *Ahl al-Sunna*’,⁷⁹ were able to win a larger parliamentary bloc, they would have been able to compete with the Future Movement over the leadership of their community.⁸⁰

According to the scholar and MP in the FPM parliamentary bloc, Farid el-Khazen, 'the Future Movement did not want to open the door [ie to run the elections on time] to compete with the Islamic fundamentalist movements which became very strong'.⁸¹ He also added another factor, namely the broken alliance between the Future Movement and the former prime minister, Najib Mikati, and minister Muhammad Safadi, two of its (former) Sunni allies in Tripoli, northern Lebanon.⁸²

Given the rise of the FPM, and with its Christian allies running the risk of significant losses, it is easy to see why the Future Movement rapidly bought into the postponement. With clear dangers in supporting the 'Orthodox Gathering' electoral reform law and vociferous opposition likely to damage relations with Christian allies, pushing these issues back could only seem like an attractive option. This was also shaped by hope that shifts in the Syrian conflict would strengthen the Future Movement's domestic position.

For Hizbollah, on the other hand, support for postponement seems much less obvious. Clearly the FPM's rise would lead to a significant boost for the March 8 coalition. One explanation for Hizbollah's desire to effectively freeze Lebanese politics is likely to be its intervention in Syria in May 2013.⁸³ There was obviously a desire to focus on helping to secure the Asad regime, thus strengthening its own position. Hizbollah's ability to defeat the Syrian opposition in Qusayr improved its domestic position both within its sect and in terms of reducing its vulnerability by decreasing the chance of the Asad regime's defeat. It is also worth considering how an increase in FPM representation in the March 8 coalition might alter the balance within that coalition. While Hizbollah and the FPM have an interesting and resilient alliance of their own,⁸⁴ an increase in FPM representation from the 19 seats it holds, potentially taking seats from both the LFP and *Kataeb* on the March 14 side, as well as from *el-Marada* in the March 8 coalition, could have ramifications for the coalition as a whole, loosening Shi'a influence.

Thus, to some extent the Future Movement supported the postponement of the elections until the Syrian opposition's position against the Asad regime improves, while Hizbollah was focused instead on its immersion in the Syrian conflict and the potential impact a positive involvement could have on its position at home. Abdullah Abu-Habib explains the positions of the two political parties regarding the extension of Parliament's term for 18 months:

While the Shiite duo (Hezbollah and Amal) might benefit from [postponement] as a result of Hezbollah's immersion in the Syrian quagmire...[the Future Movement], on the other hand, favors extension as a means to galvanize and organize its electoral 'machine', which proved capable of transporting home tens of thousands of expatriate voters during the 2009 elections.⁸⁵

Hizbollah were therefore also, 'buying time until the war shifts in their favor'.⁸⁶

The Future Movement's decision to support a postponement of the elections was clearly not only informed by a lack of 'preparation', as Abu-Habib argues. If the Syrian regime is toppled, or even if the tide visibly turns against Asad, the Future Movement and the March 14 coalition would be in a powerful position to negotiate a new electoral law, especially as the positions of their domestic rivals will be weakened. After the conquest of Qusayr by Hizbollah

and the Syrian regime, the position of anti-Asad groups was weakened, meaning that the Future Movement had even more interest in supporting continued postponement.⁸⁷ Both the Future Movement and the March 14 coalition more widely 'could [therefore] deem that it is in [their] interest to... postpone elections until the Qusair loss is assimilated and its results and repercussions dissipated, both in Lebanon and Syria; or until the presumed international revenge for the fall of the city matures, which would lead to better Lebanese electoral conditions for the Hariri coalition'.⁸⁸ The PSP meanwhile had a similar interest, awaiting developments in Syria with an eye on seeing whether Saudi Arabia's influence would increase. Clearly much of the elision of interests is about waiting until circumstances are more favourable, yet this is not enough to fully explain what has occurred with the decision to postpone the elections.

While there has clearly been a strong element of opportunism and a degree of coincidence in the elision of interests which led to postponement, there have also been elements of compromise, socialisation and pragmatism in the decision.⁸⁹ This is also evident in the way in which the inability of either bloc to rule without PSP support has created a situation where the government continues to function. The 2014 nomination of Tammam Salaam as prime minister as a compromise candidate, nominated by the March 14 coalition and voted for overwhelmingly by parliament,⁹⁰ including Hizbollah, is a sign that there is a real interest in keeping the country on something approaching an even keel. The inability to decide on a new president and the subsequent vesting of presidential powers in the post of prime minister also fits this pattern.

Aside from the calculation and bargaining seen above, it is also possible to see how the interests of the parties on these issues elide because of other factors. The first of these is the desire of the vast majority of their constituents to avoid a return to the civil war. Awareness of this danger and the desire not to return to the past is a significant factor making it hard to take actions which are perceived to add to the risk of civil strife, and which could undermine electoral support should blame be apportioned for risking peace.⁹¹ The second, related aspect here is the way in which Lebanese national identity (while still weak) has strengthened over time.⁹² A particular exemplar of this is the role (and at times near reification) accorded to the Lebanese Army as an institution which stands above the sects and adopts a peacekeeping role between factions.⁹³ The growing sense of being Lebanese, despite internal differences, interlinks with the trauma of the civil war to create new narratives which politicians cannot ignore. All parties must speak to more than the interests of their sect. While this is encapsulated in the need for cross-sectarian alliances, it is also personified in the extensive recourse to the use of the national flag and the way in which the country can pull together in the face of Israel.⁹⁴

The final area in which interests elide is rather less wholesome.⁹⁵ The end of the civil war brought with it significant foreign direct investment in Lebanon, a great deal of which came from Saudi Arabia. The destruction of infrastructure in the 2006 Israeli–Hizbollah war brought a further injection of resources for reconstruction from Iran and the wider international community. All this investment led to a growing economy and a resurgence in Lebanon's tourist industry, meaning that all sides now have a vested interest in ensuring that economic growth continues.⁹⁶ The dark side to this is that opportunities for corruption are

rife.⁹⁷ As Reinhoud Leenders demonstrates in his recent book, *Spoils of Truce: Corruption and Statebuilding in Postwar Lebanon*, there is a great deal of ‘high corruption’ going on within Lebanese politics.⁹⁸ Leenders shows that the Lebanese state itself was a ‘major ingredient of the elites’ strategies aimed at self-enrichment and political outmanoeuvring of their rivals’, meaning that they maintained a clear vested interest in ensuring their continued access to the state and a continuation of the state itself – i.e. in the perpetuation of the current political system.⁹⁹ If, as Leenders discusses, there are clear differences in the nature of corruption in the pre- and post-civil war periods, then the corrupt system in existence since 1990 might well act as more of a ‘tie that binds’,¹⁰⁰ entrenching political parties’ interests in stability and in being able to maintain clientelist structures through continuing access to resources.¹⁰¹

The ways in which these more intangible interests shared between the parties interact with those discussed above is complex and difficult to trace but a good case can be made that the elisions of interest referred to above do reinforce other dynamics within the consociational system,¹⁰² and have pulled political parties towards pragmatism when dealing with the issues Lebanon faces, especially the consequences of the Syrian conflict.

This elision of multiple interests has therefore led to a situation where Lebanon has been able to defy predictions of inevitably being sucked into the conflict in Syria, with predictable catastrophic consequences. It has instead been remarkably resilient in the face of the spill-over effects.

Conclusion

The Syrian conflict represents a turning point in Lebanon’s political process since the Syrian military withdrawal in 2005. Despite predictions to the contrary, Lebanon has avoided the fate of being sucked into the Syrian vortex and seeing its own civil war reignite. Sectarian tensions in Lebanon have been inflamed but the country has coped surprisingly well with the influx of almost 1.5 million Syrian refugees. Meanwhile, Lebanon’s political parties are all betting on the implications of Syria’s misery in the hope that they will weaken their inter- and intra-sectarian opponents. As the analysis above shows, each coalition also hopes, in part, that it will be able to bolster its domestic position against the others in negotiations over a new electoral law that best suits its interests. Given the nature of their external alliances and the unfolding developments of the Syrian conflict, the Lebanese parties’ ability to distance themselves from their neighbour’s conflict remains relatively weak, generating more desire to postpone elections while the parties continue to wait and see, and further undermining attempts to formulate a new electoral law. It is clear, however, that, while the Syrian conflict plays a role, domestic concerns and the inability to agree on a new electoral law play the more significant part in the decision to postpone the elections.

It is unlikely that the ‘Orthodox Gathering’ law will be passed. Without external guidance to force a compromise, as in 2008, Lebanese leaders, relatively neglected for the first time in decades, have had to try to reach alternative arrangements for managing their disputes. The emergence of a complex elision of interests among Lebanese political parties with a stake in the basic structure and stability of the state has left Lebanon in a state of stable instability: not able

to find a final resolution to a range of issues, while still being able to manage disagreements and reach temporary compromises.¹⁰³ The further postponement on 5 November 2014 of the parliamentary elections until 2017 (in a session in which 95 of Lebanon's 128 MPs voted for postponement, with 97 MPs present),¹⁰⁴ is the clearest example of this trend.

The only loser in this situation is democracy in Lebanon. With Lebanese voters excluded from voting on new representatives, thus raising genuine concerns, but at the same time, if the postponement of elections provides an additional buffer against the return of civil war and ensures the continuation of the country's stable instability, then it may be a price worth paying - at least in the short term.

Notes on contributors

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Notes

1. For a good outline of this traditional narrative, see Zahar, "Power Sharing in Lebanon."
2. Kahn, *On Escalation*, 293.
3. Jabbara and Jabbara, "Consociational Democracy in Lebanon."
4. Lijphart, "Consociational Democracy," 216.
5. Andeweg, "Consociational Democracy," 509.
6. For a full introduction to the Lebanese political system, see Salamey, *The Government and Politics of Lebanon*, Parts I, III.
7. In a 2000 article Brenda Seaver explores the causes of the civil war and concludes that 'the Lebanese case confirms Lijphart's theory that elite consensus backed by consociational mechanisms is crucial for stable democracy in divided societies...Specifically, the Lebanese civil war supports the hypothesis that a turbulent regional system can strain the domestic elite consensus upon which power-sharing is based and can ultimately contribute to regime collapse.' Seaver, "The Regional Sources of Power-sharing Failure," 268.
8. Chandra, "Ethnic Parties and Democratic Stability," 235.
9. Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*, 297.
10. This also applies to the cabinet.
11. Interview, Beirut, May 8 and 15, 2012.
12. Securitisation theory is rarely applied to Lebanon but provides a useful framework through which to examine the way in which issues are politicised, then securitised through the discourse of elites. It is a powerful tool for exploring symbolic politics and the use of fear for political purposes in a divided and ethnically based polity. See Buzan et al., *Security*.
13. Diamond and Gunther, "Types and Functions of Parties," 23.
14. Kota, "Undemocratic Lebanon," 121.
15. Interview, Beirut, May 15, 2012.
16. Hudson, *The Precarious Republic*, 9.
17. For example, the Lebanese civil war of 1975–90.

18. Salloukh, "The Limits of Electoral Engineering," 640.
19. What is noticeable is the absence of direct foreign intervention to exert pressure on domestic parties to reach an agreement on a new electoral law, as was the case in the formulation of the previous electoral laws. This can, in part, be explained by the immersion of the main foreign players in Lebanon (Syria, Saudi Arabia and Qatar) in the Syrian conflict and their betting on its consequences, which may endow them with greater influence over Lebanese domestic politics at a later stage.
20. Salloukh, "The Limits of Electoral Engineering."
21. el-Khazen, *Lebanon's First Postwar Parliamentary Election*, 21–22.
22. The Christian community's boycott came about because of opposition to the Syrian military presence, as well as to the Taif Agreement, which limited the powers that were given to the main Christian position in the political system, the presidency.
23. Salem, *Skirting Democracy*, 27.
24. Hanf, *Coexistence in Wartime Lebanon*, 629.
25. Khashan, "Lebanon's 1996 Controversial Parliamentary Elections," 25.
26. Salloukh, "The Limits of Electoral Engineering," 642.
27. Haddad, "The Lebanese Parliamentary Elections"; and Haddad, "The Political Consequences of Electoral Laws."
28. The short timeframe to formulate a new electoral law between the Syrian military withdrawal in April and the specified deadline of the polls in June 2005 led Lebanese political parties to adopt the 2000 electoral law.
29. The violence erupted between Hizbollah, the Amal Movement and the SSNP on one side and the Future Movement and the PSP on the other, after the then government decided on 6 May 2008 to dismantle Hizbollah's private telecommunications network. The conflict between these two rival blocs culminated in an outbreak of violence, when Hizbollah used its military power to force the government to withdraw its decision to dismantle the network. Armed Hizbollah members took to the streets of Beirut and forced the evacuation of the offices of the Future Movement. A power-sharing agreement, ending the violence, was engineered on 21 May 2008 and known as the Doha agreement.
30. The Christian parties requested the adoption of an electoral law based on small districts. This law would allow Christian voters to have a greater influence on the election results compared with electoral laws based on large districts. Despite this improvement, for the 2013 parliamentary elections the Christian parties requested further reformulation, with the aim of further improving Christian voters' influence on election results.
31. On 8 March 2005 a major demonstration in favour of Syria took place. Syrian troops had been present in the country since the earliest days of the civil war and Syria was immediately suspected of being behind the assassination of the former prime minister, Rafic Hariri, in a massive car bomb in Beirut on 14 February 2005. This protest, clearly designed as a pre-emptory show of strength, was headed mainly by Hizbollah, but also comprised several other political parties, including the Shi'a Amal Movement, the Druze-led Lebanese Democratic Party (LDP), the secular Syrian Socialist National Party (SSNP), and the Christian (mainly Maronite) *el-Marada* movement, which became a political party in June 2006. This alliance was later bolstered by the addition in February 2006 of the Maronite Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) under Michel Aoun, who ironically had previously been known for his desire to end the Syrian occupation. At this point it should be noted that the FPM, the LDP, *el-Marada*, the Armenian Revolutionary Federation and the Solidarity Party are officially known as the Change and Reform Bloc, which is allied with the March 8 Alliance. For simplicity this article makes reference to the March 8 coalition as the wider movement which supports the March 8 Alliance bloc. As a direct response to the Hizbollah-led demonstration, large crowds gathered on 14 March to condemn the murder of Rafic Hariri and to call for the withdrawal of Syrian troops. This demonstration is also referred to as the 'Cedar Revolution', and was spearheaded by the Future Movement. The alliance was composed of a number of political parties, the most prominent of which were the *Kataeb* party and the Lebanese Forces Party (LFP), both Maronite, and the Druze Progressive Socialist Party (PSP). The alliance accused Syria of assassinating Rafic Hariri and several anti-Syrian politicians and journalists, including key figures such as Gebran Tueni and Samir Kassir. Gebran Tueni was an MP and the editor-in-chief of *Annahar* newspaper. Samir Kassir was a scholar, journalist and a staunch opponent of the Syrian military presence in Lebanon. The March 14 coalition is considered a close ally of Saudi Arabia and the USA, and was able to win 69 of the 128 seats in 2005 and 71 in 2009.
32. It should be borne in mind here that, while many of the parties discussed so far are avowedly secular and at times can and do attract votes and candidates from other communities, they tend to think and act in sectarian terms and are known as representing the interests of particular communities. There is also an element of tactical voting at times with, for example, isolated Shi'a communities in Christian areas voting for the FPM of Aoun, in part because of his charisma but mainly because he is allied with the two main Shi'a groupings of Amal and Hizbollah.
33. "Election Results 2009." According to the Lebanese constitution, the government is considered to have resigned when more than a third of its ministers resign. Thus, the March 8 coalition sought to hold the blocking third to be able to veto government decisions. Also, a sectarian party that represents the overwhelming majority of its community is able to veto government decisions, since its exclusion from the

- decision-making process would mean the exclusion of the whole sectarian community that this party represents.
34. Interview with the former Deputy of the Speaker of Parliament and head of the Orthodox Gathering, Elie Ferzli, Hazmieh, November 27, 2014.
 35. Kossayfi, "Al-Muqabala."
 36. Bassil, "Saad," 8. Because of the geographic dispersion of the Christians in many electoral districts, Christian candidates are often forced to weave electoral alliances with Muslim parties and elites, which often means supporting their political views and advancing the interests of their Muslim voters, such as employment opportunities. Thus, a law that enables Christian MPs to be elected by mainly Christian voters will ensure that their political views are more reflective of the Christian voters' political aspirations and hopes, and they will seek to advance their community's interests.
 37. For more detail on the Maronite role and preference in Lebanese politics, see Haddad, "The Maronite Legacy."
 38. The 'Orthodox Gathering' electoral law, which is based on PR, if adopted, would lead to the victory of the March 8 coalition. This is because the Future Movement's parliamentary bloc would lose about half its MPs, who are non-Sunnis. The political opponents of the Future Movement within the Sunni community, such as the Nasserites, who are close to the March 8 coalition, would be able to win parliamentary seats, since the Future Movement does not represent the overwhelming majority of its sect. Also the PSP would not be able to win all the seats in Druze-dominated districts, since many of these districts include its political opponents.
 39. Hajj, "Lebanon's Electoral Law."
 40. The Lebanese president is voted for by parliament and is a position reserved for Maronites, at the time of writing and despite the presidential term being over on 25 May 2014, the Parliament has been unable to vote to appoint a new president – despite 15 attempts, no candidate has been agreed. The system is made harder by the need both for a quorum, which was only met in the first round of voting on 23 April 2014, and for a two-thirds majority. In the only round to go ahead the LFP's leader Geagea could only amass 48 votes or 37.5%.
 41. National News Agency, "Aoun." Elie Ferzli also confirms the point that the LFP received an offer from the Future Movement to reject the 'Orthodox Gathering' electoral law, which involved an increase in the number of the LFP MPs in the next parliamentary elections. The Future Movement parliamentary bloc is composed of several non-partisan Christian MPs, who represent Christian minorities in the districts dominated by Sunnis, such as the 'North'. The Future Movement's offer was thus to allow the LFP to run elections for Christian MPs' seats in these Sunni-dominated districts. Interview, Hazmieh, November 27, 2014.
 42. "Geagea defends LF."
 43. Reda, "Muwajaha 'Masihyya' Bayn Geagea."
 44. Interview with the scholar and MP in the FPM parliamentary bloc, Farid el-Khazen, Beirut, December 9, 2014. El-Khazen attended the Christian parties' meetings in Bkirki (the residence of the Maronite Patriarch) to discuss the electoral law.
 45. Interview, Hazmieh, November 27, 2014.
 46. The Muslim Brotherhood's Lebanon offshoot.
 47. The weakness of the Syrian military and its political support of from Hizbollah will undermine Party of God ability to combat Israel, which might weaken its claim that it is defending the country. This may lead to it losing popularity within its community. In such a situation it may not be able to win the elections as the main representative of its sectarian community.
 48. Salem, "Can Lebanon Survive the Syrian Crisis?"
 49. For more background on Islamist politics in Lebanon (both Sunni and Shi'a), see Hamzeh, "Lebanon's Islamists and Local Politics."
 50. These groups became very active after the eruption of the Syrian conflict. The conflict represented an opportunity for them to strengthen their sectarian leadership. Thus, they spoke extensively about defending the rights of the Sunnis in Syria and Lebanon against Hizbollah and the Syrian regime. For Sunni Islamist groups the Syrian conflict is essential to undermining the political and military power of that country's domestic ally, Hizbollah. Their hatred of the Assad regime is linked to their repression in Lebanon during Syria's military presence and the repression of allies in Syria. For more discussion about the implications of the Syrian conflict for the Sunni parties in Lebanon, see Lefèvre, *The Roots of Crisis*.
 51. Clashes erupted between the Lebanese army and pro-Syrian opposition armed groups in Aarsal when the Lebanese army attempted to capture Khaled Humayyad, who is accused of terrorist offences. These clashes left two military officers dead and several soldiers wounded in February 2013. Aarsal is a mainly Sunni Lebanese village located next to the Syrian–Lebanese border; it is known for hosting Syrian opposition activists.
 52. "Aarsal Fi Qabdat Al-Jjayash Al-Llubnany," 42.
 53. Nasrallah, "Al-'amin Al-'aam."
 54. Qusayr is a Syrian city located next to the Lebanese–Syrian border.
 55. Nasrallah, "Sayyed Nasrallah."

56. Ibid. Several suicide bombings took place in Lebanon after Hizbollah's intervention in Syria. Jabhat al-Nusra and the Abdullah Azzam Brigades, both extreme militant groups opposed to the Asad regime, claimed responsibility for these attacks. The aim of these suicide bombings was to exert pressure on Hizbollah to withdraw its armed forces from Syria.
57. Akkoun, "Al-Druze Fi Lubnan."
58. In 2011 the government of the former prime minister, Saad Hariri, was forced to resign after the resignation of the March 8 coalition, which held a third of its posts. Their resignation was in protest at the March 14 coalition decision, which held the majority of the cabinet posts, to fund the Special Tribunal for Lebanon that indicted four Hizbollah members over the Rafic Hariri assassination. Therefore, the March 8 coalition and the PSP nominated Najib Mikati (2011–13) to be the new PM to replace Saad Hariri, who had been Riyadh's closest Lebanese ally. As a result, Saudi Arabia broke its relations with the PSP.
59. Interview with Elie Ferzli, Hazmieh, November 27, 2014.
60. Akkoun, "Al-Druze Fi Lubnan."
61. Lebanon Files News, "Kalimat Michel Aoun."
62. "Samir Geagea."
63. Ibid (emphasis in the original).
64. Nassar, "Samir Geagea."
65. It is striking that Geagea is the only militia leader to have been punished for crimes committed during the civil war.
66. "Milyuwn Wa-200 'alf Nazah Suri Fi Lubnan."
67. Manipulation of the Syrian refugee issue by the FPM is connected to Christian grievances regarding the settlement of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, in what, to many, seems like a re-run of history, since 'the Christians of Lebanon were the party most concerned about the settlement of Palestinians – the majority of whom are Muslims – in Lebanon, for fear of them disrupting the political and numerical balance there.' Chararah, "Lebanon Struggles." The concern is that the refugees could become a source of instability, as was the case with the Palestinian refugees during the civil war, not least because these refugees could be recruited by extremist groups with the aim of carrying the Syrian conflict into Lebanon. Salem, "Can Lebanon Survive The Syrian Crisis?," 21.
68. Lebanon all but closed its borders to further refugees in October 2014. "Lebanon Sharply Limits Syrian Refugee Entry."
69. He clearly framed the issue in such a way as to mobilise the popular support of Christians in his electoral district of Batroun. It is important to note that Bassil is Michel Aoun's son-in-law and is not an MP, having twice failed to be elected under two different electoral laws in both 2005 and 2009.
70. Aziz, "Syrian Armed Groups among those Displaced."
71. International Crisis Group, *A Precarious Balancing Act*, 12.
72. Interview, Beirut, December 9, 2014.
73. The MP from the Future Movement Ammar Hourri's justification for his party's rejection of the 'Orthodox Gathering' electoral law was that it violates the Taif Agreement, which emphasised the confessional coexistence between Lebanese communal groups. He argued that this law would spark intra-sectarian conflicts between the political parties and elites to mobilise the popular support of their respective sects. Interview with Hourri, Beirut, December 12, 2014.
74. Parliamentary elections in Lebanon usually take place in June every four years and the Parliament was supposed to postpone the elections for one year so they could be held in June 2014. However, as a result of the presidential elections, which were supposed to take place in May 2014, the Parliament delayed parliamentary elections until November, especially since the previous presidential elections in 2007 lasted more than seven months before the parties agreed on the election of President Michel Sulieman (2008–14).
75. Younes, "Naa'ib 'aouni Li-'Now."
76. Abu-Habib, "Postponing Lebanon's Elections."
77. The 2009 parliamentary elections left the PSP with seven seats (more than *Kataeb* and only one behind the LFP, making it the fifth largest party in Parliament), meaning that it held the balance of power in Parliament between the two coalitions. The March 14 coalition, now without the PSP, has 61 MPs (48% of all parliamentary seats) and the March 8 coalition has 57 MPs (45%). Thus, the Druze party was able to secure its participation in the governments that have been formed since 2009 (2009, 2011 and 2014) because neither coalition was able to pass a vote of confidence in Parliament without its support.
78. Abu-Habib, "Postponing Lebanon's Elections."
79. Abdel-Latif, *Lebanon's Sunni Islamists*, 2.
80. Interview with Elie Ferzli, Hazmieh, November 27, 2014.
81. Interview, Beirut, December 9, 2014.
82. Ibid. Mikati and Safadi broke the alliance with the Future Movement after the parliamentary elections in 2009. They consider themselves 'centrists'.
83. Interview with the scholar and MP, Farid el-Khazen, Beirut, December 9, 2014.
84. Bouyoub, "The Free Patriotic Movement and Hizbullah."

85. Abu-Habib, "Postponing Lebanon's Elections."
86. Ghattas Saab, "West Fears Postponement of Lebanon's Elections."
87. Interview, Farid el-Khazen, Beirut, December 9, 2014.
88. Aziz, "Lebanese Politics Affected."
89. An element of this may also come from the lessons of 2008, when other militias proved no match for Hizbollah.
90. "Lebanon Names Tamam Salam as New Prime Minister."
91. See Makdisi, "The Modernity of Sectarianism," Conclusion.
92. For an interesting study examining earlier trends in this regard, see el-Solh, *Lebanon and Arabism*. This is a complex area but engagement with the literature shows some resurgence in Lebanese identity (however contested this may be). See, for example, Volk, *Memorials and Martyrs*; Kaufman, *Reviving Phoenicia*; and Abdelhady, "Representing the Homeland."
93. See, *inter alia*, Barak, "Commemorating Malikiyya"; Barak, *The Lebanese Army*; Gaub, "Multi-ethnic Armies"; and Knudsen, "Lebanese Armed Forces."
94. "Poll Finds Overwhelming Majorities."
95. Wickberg, "Overview of Corruption and Anti-corruption."
96. Karam, "Lebanon is too Corrupt to Care."
97. For more background on corruption in Lebanon, see Farida and Ahmadi-Esfahani, "Corruption and Economic Growth."
98. Leenders, *Spoils of Truce*.
99. *Ibid.*, 231.
100. The phrase is prevalent in the corruption literature. See, for example, Scott, "The Analysis of Corruption"; and Donaldson and Dunfee, "Ties that Bind in Business Ethics."
101. For more on clientelism in Lebanon, see Hamzeh, "Clientelism, Lebanon."
102. Again it should be borne in mind here that consociationalism as a tool for understanding Lebanon is not without its issues but is a factor frequently used in the literature on Lebanon. For more discussion of this (albeit with a more pessimistic conclusion on Lebanon's stability), see Haddad, "Lebanon."
103. In this sense the findings of this article are slightly different from those of other examinations, while many of the same factors hold true, in contradiction to Adham Saouli's finding of: 'a causal relation between the intensity of regional conflict and level of stability in Lebanon...The more intense the regional conflict, the more unstable Lebanon has tended to become, and vice versa (p.701).' Saouli, "Stability under Late State Formation." It seems that something has changed in Lebanon to ensure a much higher degree of stability in the face of the most intense conflict the region has ever experienced.
104. Holmes, "Lebanese Parliament Extends Own Term."

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