THE LEBANESE CIVIL WAR
— Urbanization, Classes and Sects —

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1. A Century of Lebanon

Up to the beginning of the 19th century in the Mount Lebanon area several political-religious minority groups lived in peace almost free from outside influence.

However, the decade of the 1830s under the occupation of the Egyptian army paved the way for the drastic change characteristic of contemporary Lebanon. Egyptian rule introduced Egypt's domestic economic policy to the area; encouragement of silk production and the monopoly of foreign trade with the West as resources to renew and empower their arms.

As a result, private land-holdings prevailed among the peasantry and they were freed from the control of the notables who enjoyed power over the cultivators as tax collectors subject to the Turkish Central Government. The tax-farming groups also were absorbed into the cocoon and land development for the mulberry tree as it was their new source of power. Among these groups the power struggles intensified in search of control over the entire mountain area and the Shi'habis rose to the top.

The Shi'habis were Sunnites and held an extensive network among the leading families beyond the line of religious borders. And the Shi'tabis were in a position to integrate the voices of the whole mountain area. When the Egyptian army evacuated from Lebanon, the Shi'habis made clear their change of religious affiliation to Maronite. It was of course not a sudden change but a gradual shift. One of the most important reasons behind it was their dependence on the Church for technology and management of mulberry and cocoon cultivation; the Church was the leader in these fields, importing technology from Italy, then the most advanced country. The Church had been eager to be a political representative with its growing sense of self-confidence as a leading integrator of the mountain area both in the fields of culture and economies. The church had already been staffed by officials and intellectuals with a cultivator's background and had come to command the notable. The Maronites awakened their ideological identity in the northern mountains in particular.
In sharp contrast to this, the south was in the hands of the Druze notables who were hostile to each other. The Druze communities preserved their traditional social structure composed of princes, warriors and peasants, instead of expanding their economic activities by means of the cocoon and silk industries. Generally speaking, the north was a progressive agricultural society with the look of increasing unity but the south was of a traditional military-aristocratic structure composed of several conservative factions and the Druzes as a whole were declining quickly from their leading position in Mount Lebanon politics.

In addition, a new factor emerged from behind the scenes. It was a tremendous population increase in the northern Maronite sector and the outflow of surplus manpower with skills in the new industries into the south, where the population was decreasing due to internal strife. Hence a complicated overlapping of religious affiliation and economic status started in the Lebanese mountains, taking the form of communal struggles instead of a clash between the haves and have-nots who came into the south as peasants or labourers under the landlords of a different faith.

Generally speaking, in Mount Lebanon secular relations were molded into religious ones under the mantle of communal identity to avoid internal clashes between the rich and the poor. A chain of peasant revolts after the 1840s, it is called Æmmiya, led initially by the blacksmith Tanyus, was a typical example of a unified commoners’ movement crossing the lines of sectarian division. They were social protests of the lower classes against the rulers, who disregarded their pleas and desire. It was a parallel movement from below with that of the elite in the central government from above to modernize the Ottoman Empire, in the broader historical perspective.

But this course of development was suspended by the sudden invasion of the French army which landed at Beirut under the excuse of protecting the Christians and routes to the Holy Land. The army headed straight to the center of peasant revolt in Kisrawan amid the Maronites and destroyed the farmers declared republic. This is an archetype of modern Lebanese politics; foreign powers join in the local strife and the local people become unable to solve their problems by their own efforts. The forced intervention to the natural development of the area by the external power benefited the landed classes most, including the Maronite Church, the largest landowner, and its political allies the landed notables both Christian and Muslim.

The notables tended to form alliances with major foreign powers, stimulated by the French-Maronite patron-client relationship; the Russians with the Greek Orthodox, the British with the Druzes and the Germans with the Sunnites which was the official Turkish confession.

This communal-diplomatic tie was a reflection of their Eastern interests and policies. At the same time, it was the result of the survival policy among
the notables in search of patronage from the major world powers. It was a common trait among the upper-class nationalists before World War II.

The dragoman was the channel to develop the relationship with the foreign power, providing local information and translation-interpretation service to the consulates free of charge. The diplomatic corps counteroffered some of their privileges to dragoman, such as freedom to make trips and import things duty free, which were helpful to the local populace for making a fortune and for the security of life. The Lebanese bourgeoisie which developed from the dragoman was therefore a comparadore capitalist by nature and had matured to a merchant republicanism by keeping close ties with their hinterland partners of a different faith. It is important to pay attention to port city–countryside commercial relations, as well as with the diplomat-dragomen linkage under the guise of communalistic paternalism by the powers.

When Beirut became the provincial capital under the administrative reform of Tanzimat, the seven Beirut families of the Greek Orthodox headed by the Bustros were in a position to control the key sectors of trade with four other of the Sunni groups, like the Itanis and the newcomers, the Tabbars, and the al-Wazzans. In total 30 family groups were predominant. They say that today one of the families still holds the majority of the West Beirut land as private property. Interestingly enough, no Maronite is among them at this stage as their homeland was not Beirut but in the mountains.

The turning point for the Maronites was World War I, in particular the French Mandate formulated the Grand Liban which includes the coastal zones to the base of the mountains. They had seized the opportunity to set up their position and power in the sectors of banking, insurance, shipping, and other services, as well as commerce and trade with the whole Middle East centered in Great Syria. To the Greek Orthodox groups, however, the tide turned against them.

The French, however, did not block the presidency of Charles Dabbas, a Greek Orthodox, to the newly born Christian Republic. It was of course on the one hand to soften the possible repercussions from the Sunnites and other Muslims, but on the other hand the Maronites were still too immature to take the political initiative in the expanded entity under the mandate. Therefore, the French were quite willing to call in the Armenian Refugees from Anatolia, which made a slim Christian majority over the Muslims in Lebanon.

On the basis of the 1932 census, the Christians held a 6 to 5 lead in terms of political power. Hence, eleven became the standard basic unit in formulating the political representative system. The 6 to 5 ratio was in a sense a political legacy initiated after the peasant revolts of the last century in the Mount Lebanon area to settle the cross-sectarian class struggles. We can safely regard it as an extension of the Mount Lebanese principle to greater Lebanon under French rule. The sectarian political balance (ターْرّيّر) carried over to independ-
ent Lebanon fixed a functional division of power among the sects; the Maronite president, the Sunnite prime minister, and the Shi‘ite speaker.

It has been called a national pact (al-mītāq), but actually it was a fait accompli made by the then-leading political figures to fill the administrative vacuum left immediately after the declaration of political independence earlier than the date set by the French authorities. In this sense it is a political myth to regard it as well-established tradition or the historical legacy of Lebanon.

II. The Old and New Middle Classes—Structure of Conflict

The first generation of the Lebanese political elite was neither well experienced nor skilled in administration. To meet the needs of the new state machine, the key posts were allotted to the elites’ relatives without paying attention to their qualifications. Thanks to this nepotism, a plutocratic corruption prevailed and was deeply rooted in the new state structure. Its result was inefficiency and poor operation of the state machine, as has been seen in all new states. But in Lebanon, it did not lead to social and political turmoil, as the whole nation was in a boom of economic expansion for almost three decades on the basis of free trade, in contrast to neighbouring states which controlled their economies for their self-interest. In other words, it was economic nationalism towards self-reliance as the backbone of the newly-acquired political independence. The Arabs defeat in the war against the independence of Israel had triggered a chain of military coups, in particular in Syria, and initiated the Arab Boycott policy which cut relations with firms keeping trade relations with Israel. It was a good guarantee for Lebanon to be free from competition with the Jews, whose business network covered all of the Middle East for a long time. Due to the nationalistic policies of the Arab states, a tremendous amount of escape foreign capital flowed into Beirut and new investments, not only from the West, but from the oil-producing countries. Lebanon enjoyed a high rate of economic growth over 10% annually in surface value well up to the economic crisis in the West in the early 70s, which made an outflow of oil money and capital from Lebanon to the industrialized countries. The changing tide of financial activities is the remote but basic reason for the current civil war. Oil money played an important role to the Lebanese economy and after the Arab-Israel war her growth had been accelerated by the Arab Boycott.

However, behind the rapid economic growth and expansion of Lebanon, especially in Beirut, the seeds of political change were taking root quietly.

The upper middle class and professionals were becoming increasingly critical of the traditional notables’ diplomatic alliance with the French and their administrative inability. They were keen to run the state machine in a modern manner, which was far from usual. Their claims for betterment came
from the changing international setting that saw Lebanon as a small island in a sea of Arab Muslims and also from an analysis of international affairs that saw France as no longer the sole supreme power but America now commanding influence in the Middle East. The leading figure of this trend was Chamil Chamun, a veteran administrator and self-made politician, from an old middle-class family. He raised voices against Mr. Khoury who behaved as if he were life-long president of the Republic. Under pressure to set a time limit on the presidency, he set a term of six years but intended to amend the mītāq to be re-elected. However, he failed and Chamun succeeded into office backed by the modernizing middle classes.

In 1953 the new president revised the election system and reduced the number of seats in the parliament in full use of the Gerrymander line in order to block the power and influence of the notables. In 1957 and 1960 he increased the number of MPs by 50% at each election. It was clearly the hostility of the middle class and professionals toward the autocratic establishment, and also a means to strengthen the political status of the expanding middle classes due to the constant economic growth of Lebanon.

In doing so, Chamun was preparing to remain in the presidency for a second term, to try to revise the mītāq, with a good excuse to defend the Lebanese Christian Republic in line with Western democracy, in opposition to burning anti-Western Arab-Muslim nationalism. When his intentions were revealed a civil war started in the form of sectarian strife between the Christian and Muslim camps in 1958.

In reality, it was a clash between the Maronites and Sunnites, but the former were mainly represented by the middle class and the latter under the hegemony of the notables. It was also an ideological clash between the two camps over the international policy at the peak of Nasserism. In this crisis of national identity, the commander in chief of the Lebanese army, General Shihab, kept the political neutrality of army and stood aloof from politics opposing the strong pressure from the president. The American marines landed in Beirut on request of President Chamun and calmed the civil war down. He was to leave office by the end of his term. General Shihab was elected president with the unanimous support of the nation; his reluctance with politics was finally removed by persuasion of the Maronite patriarch.

President Shihab exercised his power to initiate a chain of reforms to create "an independent state from a state of independent." The first target was social development, which had been neglected by the "fromagistes" by his own naming. His six-year term was to be for recovering from the damage of civil war and re-developing the nation towards further prosperity in full use of the state machine with efficiency and discipline. A group of French Fathers of "the Catholic left", as it was called, was the president's brain to draw the blue-print for social development, and the results were remarkable indeed. For
instance, a new national education system reached all remote villages and upgraded the literacy although Lebanon had the highest of the Middle Eastern countries. West Beirut was the heart of urban renewal and development in the nation-wide boom of building construction, parallel with the national network of paved roads to meet the rapid development of motorization.

His most important contribution was seen in the field of national education, which was almost exclusively in the hands of the Maronite and other Christian missionaries. The public education policy opened the door to children from lower income families, in particular the Shi’ites, who had been barred access mainly due to the high school fees. A newly-born national university offered a chance to the Shi’ites and other poor non-Christian students to be qualified teachers and gain other skills to go up the social ladder, albeit they were recruited on the basis of the 6 to 5 sectarian ratio the same as the MPs according to the 1932 census carried out by the French, probably in harmony with their policy. Even President Shihab was not in touch with the census, as it was sure to endanger the delicate power balance of confessions in Lebanon. The 1932 census is a black mark in this Christian democratic system. Therefore, the social reforms were made in the framework of upgraded sectarian balance.

Nevertheless, thanks to the economic development in Lebanon the less advantageous jobs like school teachers and public servants attracted many of the new school and college graduates from non-privileged families. And this new middle class plays an important role in the Lebanon of the 70s both in politics and society, especially the Shi’ites.

Under Shihabi rule a group of technocrats, later called the Shihabists, ran the state machine effectively, being free from sectarian bias, and pushed the administrative modernization. From the Shihab school two presidents were elected; Mr. Hilu, the fourth president succeeding General Shihab and Mr. Sarkis, the sixth. But both of them for lack of political charisma or a strong appeal of personality to the masses paved the way to the present chaos despite their good intentions and efforts.

Under the surface of Lebanese prosperity some potential dangers to the delicate sectarian balance of power were growing in two ways. The first was the move of the traditional notables, who learned many lessons from the previous civil war, who began to arm their clients secretly in preparation for possible strife as the state’s army could not defend their interests in case of crisis. Secondly, the Shi’ites appears as a new social and formative political force for the first time.

Among the former, the Kata’ib under the initiative of Pierre Jumayel was the most well-organized as a kind of political party with programs and principles of para-military activism. He and his followers were not from the establishment to which they were extremely hostile, because of their militant
new middle-class stance of Maronite Lebanese nationalism. This party dates back to the days of the Berlin Olympics. He was deeply impressed by the discipline of the Hitlerjugend, on which line he organized the Maronite boys with physical training and group activities. Both were rarely given to them at that time. The party was almost the sole isolated supporter of Shi'habism from the Maronite camp, and the party then became popular enough to send their members to the diet; the first Kata'ib MP came from the East Beirut, an established domain of the Christian notables since French rule. Their appearance in politics was a dangerous sign in the erosion of the vested interests of the old establishment. The Kata'ib style of political appeal was quite new to most Lebanese voters, in particular to the Beirutis in making severe attacks on political old-timers with no vision. Here we can see the new middle class nature and urbanite background of the party.

On the other hand, the Shi'ites in the south Lebanon started a new move under the leadership of Imam Musa as-Sadr who returned from Iran to his father's native land and naturalized. He brought into Lebanon an Iranian style of political activism completely different from the traditional Shi'ite aristocrats. In the late '60s he made the government recognize the Shi'ite Higher Council for the first time in the history of the nation, which meant the sect had come up to the same status as that of the Sunnites. It was a remarkable success of the imam, debut into the Lebanese politics as a star. The most neglected sector in national politics now integrated into an organized body joining the political parties with the right to concessions. The Shi'ite political activists were the most militant members in the rank and file of the secularist political parties in Lebanon and smoothly shifted into their own sectarian umbrella, the Amal. In Lebanon nowadays the groups at the social bottom are activated by religious enthusiasm and raise their voices against the regime through the political party of their own sect, just as in the last century when conflicts between landlords and peasants turned into religious confrontations. The unions of school teachers and medical doctors were split into two, one of Christians and one of Muslims in their course of nation-wide development, although they still take joint action in defense of their professional interests. But it is impossible for the workers to be a formative social force because the industry has not expanded to a nation-wide scale. Their services are too diverse and scattered. Workers cannot be a social force because the Lebanese economy is mainly based on transit trade and service.

The vast majority of the working population is absorbed into small scale businesses through the channel of family networks and patron-client relationships. The mentality predominant among the owners of small businesses is characterized by "Abu Khalil", a shrewd, hard-working and hard-headed old peasant in the mountains, who is faithful to god and family, the most important things after his own life. The urban version of Abu Khalil is typically seen
in the Kata'ib member, an autocratic Maronist.

The Abu Khalil mentality was transplanted by Pierre Jumayel to the urban setting in the slightly sophisticated style of political activism armed with the exclusive Maronite ideology of the new middle class by nature; burning hostility toward the ruling and upper-professional classes among co-believers on the one hand, and on the other bitter hatred of the Arab Muslims. His ethnocentric political visage was well expressed in his words that Jesus, a Palestinian, is his dead enemy. Whether this is truly his own remark or not is out of the question but it is characteristic of his style of thinking and his son put the words into practice. His second son was in charge of the party's military action formerly under his father's control. He was bold enough to break a traditional sanctity by killing all members of a rival politician's only son, who stood in the way of building the Jumayel dynasty. In Lebanon, a father's political status is inherited by his son. Therefore, the father's life in politics is half killed by the death of his son; Bashir Jumayel’s murder is a deviation from the historic old rule in every sense, but he was indifferent to all and in the same manner he was not hesitant to shake hands with the Israeli army in hot pursuit of his aims. Hence the Maronist aspiration to ultimate power under the mantle of sectarianism is clear. The Kata'ib is not faithful to the theory or doctrine of their beliefs but to that of real power to conquer all classes above them in the Lebanese society.

The other style of the new lower-middle class radicalism is represented by the Shi'ite party mainly clustered in the southern suburbs of Beirut. These two radical groups can never make a common front due to their different basis of legitimacy and mutual hostility toward each other. The third element in the Lebanese Civil War was of course the presence of the Palestinians. It was Palestinian operations which gave the Israeli army a good excuse for their military overreaction in South Lebanon which caused a massive migration of Shi'ite refugees in outer Beirut. However, the Palestinians were not a real cause or element of the civil war as was well illustrated by the fact that their evacuation from Lebanon has left little change in the civil war, contrary to the assertions of the anti-Palestinian camps. It should be noted that the war broke out in the suburbs of Beirut. The real problems of and reasons for the war should be seen in the ecological map of the rapidly-expanded urban areas in the Greater Beirut zone.

III. BEIRUT IN CHANGE: Problems of Suburban Expansion

All less-industrialized societies have experienced an explosive population increase in the decades since World War II. Cities in Lebanon were no exceptions in attracting a tremendous surplus from rural areas in addition to the rapid population growth inside the city wards, with record-high birth rates
due to better sanitary facilities and access to medical services.

Questions to be considered here are not the so-called over-urbanisation or primate city. Both are typical of all newly-developing societies: an overwhelming concentration of power in politics and the economy apart from manpower. We are interested in looking at the results and implications of the rapid urbanisation around Beirut in the balance of sects and their structure.

A close reading of the historical map of Beirut from the viewpoint of the social ecology of the group settlements being superimposed on class differences provides us with some key information in the analysis of the current civil war.

Before the First World War the main city wards were developed east and west of the commercial center and the administrative offices to keep some space and distance between them: the two major sectarian groups were in a cluster of their own but the well-to-do Greek Orthodox families tend to dwell in the hilly quarters in the east and their Sunnite counterparts in the west nearer to the center. After the First World War and during World War II, the Maronites settled in the space between the center and hilly quarters and expanded towards the south and then to the east. The Armenian refugees settled to the North of the Orthodox communities at first, then spread to the eastern narrow areas by the Beirut River, which was the eastern border of the city. Thus the Greek Orthodox group was encircled by the two new groups and their overflow sought an area for exodus in the late 20s and early 30s. Their community was located next to the Sunnites in the West. The new Orthodox community was isolated in a sea of Muslims like an enclavé. This fact explains the hostility between the Christian and Muslim camps, which has never been a historic or permanent reality, but a symbolic myth invented and manipulated by the power aspirants in one particular corner of religious zealots. It is the specific Lebanese version of radical fundamentalist movements in the form of Maronite chauvinism in protest against the old power elites, unthinkable indifferent and inactive toward the unprecedented drastic social changes taking place after the World War II, in particular in Beirut.

An additional overload to Lebanon and especially for Beirut were the Arab Palestinian refugees, both Christian and Muslim. The majority of them settled on the outskirts of the city and later developed into a thick “poor belt” with other migrants from rural Lebanon, of various beliefs with the Shi‘ites being the largest.

These poor victims of international affairs at first centered around the eastern cliffs and banks of the Beirut River where they had water for daily life, just as the Quarantine area near the harbour. As usual, the slums were located within walking distance of their jobs. The eastern outskirts of Beirut were densely covered with tiny factories and workshops of light industries: food processing, textiles and many kinds of repair work, for example.

The “poor belt” was indeed an excellent supply source for the various
manpower needed for the rapid and constant growth of the Lebanese economy, to which Beirut played the role of locomotive and supreme beneficiary. However, the residents in the belt were still living in a state of hands-to-mouth poverty just several miles away from the most luxurious spots of day and night life in the Middle East: Hamra and Ras Beirut were the newly-developed, affluent cosmopolitan quarters with the most fashionable goods from all over the world. Both quarters attracted the snobbish new-rich and professional Lebanese who were in love with the liberal, being free from the conventionalist style of social life in the sectarian groups.

A social mode of freedom unknown in the traditional sects, was alive in the suburbs extending beyond the Boulevard, a highway encircling the city wards of the later 1950s. A survey on the life in a sector of the belt reported on inter-mixing; mixed marriage among the youth exceeded 30% to 10% for their parents' generation, which is even higher than other quarters or countries in view of the Middle Eastern average and standard.

The general picture of West Beirut and the belt may seem moderate to us. But it is enough to fire up the Abu Khalil-type religious fundamentalism to which the new lower middle class Maronites are adherents. Their nerve center, East Beirut, is less than a quarter the size of Greater Beirut and is enclosed by half, or the overwhelming religious majority. It is easy to understand their irritation at being put into the status of a minority locked into the eastern corner of the city despite their self-rating proud, authentic Lebaneseess.

Shiyah, a little community now of the Shi'ites located very close to the starting point of the current civil war, provides us a slightly different picture of sect relations prior to and after the urbanization of Beirut. Shiyah was a Maronite village which prospered on cocoon and silk. A famine and bad harvests pushed out many of the people to South America before and after the First World War. The Shi'ites came into the picture under the patronage of an Orthodox notable as groomers and horsemen from Baalbek. In the course of primary urbanization, the remaining Maronites worked the olive plantations but the poor newcomers went to vegetable cultivation due to a shortage of capital to invest beside working the soil.

In the 1950s, the Shi'ites increased their population and income and began to celebrate the Ashura Festival in public, which until then was done in the house quietly. The new festivities provoked the Maronites fury and led to split the village into two separate communities as was frequently seen in Lebanon after reaching a certain level of societal development.

Low and new middle class urbanites tend to join a party rather than remain under the umbrella of co-religionist notables, disappointed in their patriarchal controls apart from their inability to look after their clients. Of course, the notables command power in their patrimonial domains but not in the city wards.
It is therefore safe to say that the party, whether it is organized on programmes or personal appeal, predominates in the urbanized areas. And it can also be safely said that the political parties organized by religious affiliation are entities of a transitional stage in a nation changing from an agrarian society to a more large and highly integrated urban society with a multi-dimensional division of labours in which every individual must live independently on his own option and responsibility.

For individuals to live in such a society, a political party must be based on programmes that fit their values. The Lebanese parties are all halfway like its style of urbanization; the primacy of Greater Beirut among the tiny cities under the command of local chieftains and no new city has developed for many decades. The urbanization of Beirut is in reality an amorphous expansion of outskirts without any proper amenities or facilities and no national political leadership of parties beyond narrow sectarianism.

Among the two major urban Christian groups, the Greek Orthodox in general seemed to be less interested in politics and also less influential besides the intellectual fields but the communist party elites are mainly from this sect.

The Sunnites in Beirut were represented by established leaders and have constituted a major group in power under the initiative of Saeb Salem who formed several cabinets on the requests of Presidents Shihab and Franjeh. He was a well-known spokesman of Arab Muslim nationalism within the Lebanese framework. However, the new urbanites in Greater Beirut were becoming independent from his and his fellow leaders' influence since the later half of the Shihab regime. The president's persistence in the effective running of the state machine made him shift his reliance to the military intelligence rather than the leaders of the sectarian groups and parties. The staff in his confidence, however, lost their discipline in reaction to expanded activities and recruited the qaba'day as agents to check the notables to whom they had been in service, in return for protection from police charges. This element played some key societal roles at the grassroots level filling the vacuum of welfare services. They then rose to the main stage in politics sponsored by the powerful state machine, and they were not hesitant to have light arms supplied from the communal notables who were still in need of the qaba'day to command their power. Both supports from the state machine and the notables elevated them to neighborhood boss and some of them rose to be political figures in the course of the civil war. President Shihab, an honest military man of high prestige, and too rich to be corrupted, was fed up with all such political actors and went out calmly from the political games when his term of office ended. But the products of his policy, the new urban middle classes of the Maronites, the Sunnites and the Shi'ites are in a severe struggle aiming for hegemony in national politics in the form of a civil war. Their confrontation is chaos in the transitional stage of national society. Each group is busy developing its own
business domains and routes to handle goods by means of smuggling or booty, using violence to do the job. This new business by the qabādāy and others has renewed the Lebanese economy, its structure and network. Therefore, its recovery will be swifter than the Lebenon watchers can conceive of, unless there is foreign intervention.

Figure 1  Sectarian Zones of Beirut (1950s)

Figure 2  100 Years of Beirut's Growth
Figure 3  Civil War in Beirut (East, West and Suburbs)
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