Roots of Lebanon's Sectarian Politics: Colonial Legacies of the French Mandate

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Abstract

This paper contends that the French Mandate significantly contributed to the institutionalisation of sectarianism in post-colonial Lebanese politics, and it investigates the Mandate's enduring impacts on confessional governance. Building on existing research on the legacies of the Mandate and the development of sectarianism in Lebanon, the paper explores the Mandate's roots of Lebanon's sectarian politics. The analysis examines religious biases by the colonial administration and the National Pact of 1943. By doing so, this paper argues that the political representation in Lebanon can be traced back to sectarian connotations through religious quotas in the parliamentary system, patronage networks, and the fragmentation of Lebanese identity. This phenomenon is known as sectarianisation—a term that is used when political representatives exploit sectarian grudges within the population to acquire power. While other factors play a role in the development of sectarianisation, this paper argues that the French Mandate functions as the primary catalyst in the institutionalisation of sectarianism in Lebanon. Consequently, the central research question this paper seeks to answer is: What are the legacies of the French Mandate on the sectarianisation of post-colonial Lebanese politics?

Keywords: Confessionalism; French Mandate; Post-colonial Politics; Sectarianism; Colonialism; Lebanon

Introduction

"Well, that occupation is something! They left us schools, dispatches, institutions, organisations, languages!" says Joanna, the Catholic character praising the French colonial administration in Lebanon in George Khabbaz's play *Ella Eza* (2018). "Yes, but they also fostered religious bias," replies Omar, a Sunni Muslim whose response is met by Nicola, a Roman Orthodox: "You're right. And they gave the presidency to the Maronites."

This excerpt from Khabbaz's play illustrates the complicated legacy of the French Mandate on the sociopolitical landscape of Lebanon. The former "Switzerland of the East" is plagued by economic crises, political instability, foreign interference, and social divisions, which have persisted since the 20th century. With a failing government and a polarised nation, both the public and the private sectors in Lebanon are unstable due to the inability to counter corruption, poverty, and unemployment rates (Abouzeid 2021). As this paper will

explore, the structure of the Lebanese government is heavily influenced by the legacies of the French Mandate.

Furthermore, Lebanon has a rich history of cultural diversity, ranging from the early civilisations of Phoenicia and Babylon, the empires of Rome and Greece, to the colonial rule of the Ottoman Empire and the French before its independence in 1943 (Barnette et al. 2023). Consequently, Lebanon is the most religiously diverse country in the Middle East (Thames 2023). While scholarly research suggests that religious diversity often contributes to social progress (Davie 2022), the Lebanese confessional system is crippled and overwhelmed with inefficiency in fulfilling the needs of the people. This confessional system is a form of governance which designates governmental and decision-making positions based on religious affiliation, which ensures the alleged representation of the officially recognised sects in Lebanon.

This system enables Lebanon's political leaders to alienate different sects from each one another by utilising sectarian grudges that date back to the Ottoman Empire. More so, this system allows these political leaders to remain in power as long as they represent their followers' religious identities. This practice is best described as sectarianisation (Hashemi and Postel 2017). Sectarianism and sectarianisation, though closely related, differ in their point of reference. Sectarianism refers to the deep-rooted religious animosity between individuals or groups who belong to different sects, a sentiment that persists among the Lebanese population. In contrast, this paper focuses on sectarianisation, which refers to the actions of political leaders who represent these sects. Sectarianisation involves political leaders' exploitation of sectarian grudges to acquire and maintain power (Hashemi and Postel 2017; Wiesner 2020), thereby perpetuating the fragmentation of society.

Indeed, sectarian divisions extend here beyond the simple dichotomy between Muslim and Christian. Internal factions within Muslim sects, external ones with the Druze community, and opposing stances of being pro-Arab or pro-Western all contribute to the fragmentation of the Lebanese society (Fayad 2020). The Lebanese people harbour resentment accumulating over generations—a resentment that may also stem from the lack of accountability in ending the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990). Because of these developments, the Lebanese depend on their sectarian representatives to voice their grievances in parliament. This dynamic perpetuates the power of political leaders and allows their descendants to succeed them in office.

It is important to note that while the French Mandate played a pivotal role, there is a complex interplay of factors to fuel political sectarianism. Its roots stem from the pre-

Islamic Mount Lebanon. More specifically, it exists since the sectarian tensions between the Maronites and the Orthodox Christians, and after the Maronites originally escaped Syria and sought refuge there in the 10th century (Our Lady of Lebanon, 2013). Then came the rise of the Umayyad Empire and the consequent Islamic Caliphates ending with the Ottoman Empire, which, depending on the political context, decreed sectarian policies and intensified the sectarian grievances (Traboulsi 2007, 16). These developments further extended the tensions between Chrisitian-Druze and Christian-Muslim animosities. However, the French Mandate remains the focal point of this paper due to the institutionalisation of generations-old sectarianism that occurred during that era, making it the colonial catalyst for sectarian governance.

What are the legacies of the French Mandate on the sectarianisation of post-colonial Lebanese politics? The paper argues that the French colonial administration promoted a sectarian political framework which devised the modern confessional system of Lebanon. In the long term, the promotion of such a sectarian political framework induced the sectarianisation of post-colonial politics via the political representatives of major sects. The analysis of this paper encompasses the religious biases that developed during colonial rule and the National Pact of 1943 to demonstrate their enduring influence on the political representation in Lebanon today. Political representation is then analysed through three main aspects of post-colonial politics: religious quotas in the parliamentary system, patronage networks for state welfare, and the fragmentation of Lebanese identity. Building on these historical roots established during the Mandate, the investigation shows how the confessional structure evolved, thereby perpetuating sectarian dynamics in modern governance.

Pretexts in Existing Literature

The development of sectarianism in Lebanon has been a dominant topic of research regarding Lebanese politics, particularly due to sectarianism being the stimulus behind the political dynamics and events in the country since the foundation of the Lebanese state. Previous scholars demonstrate the influence of this sectarianism on many levels of analysis, including sectarianism's projection on the social identity of Lebanese citizens (Fayad 2020; Mallo 2019) and its participation in the Lebanese political system (Cammett 2011; Gardiner 2015; Salame 1986). Target analyses often revolve around identity (Fayad 2020), clientelism (Gardiner 2015), the nature of the Lebanese confessional system (Calfat 2018; Salloukh 2024), consequences on economic progress (Ghoble 2018), etc. While it is undoubtedly valuable to consider these concepts when analysing the development of sectarianism in

Lebanon, they do not provide a comprehensive understanding of how this sectarianism was initially institutionalised in Lebanon's governmental structure—a political system that primarily resulted from the French Mandate. Consequently, the goal of this paper is to build on the existing body of work to develop a theory of how French colonialism directed the overarching sectarianism of Lebanon's confessional political system.

Confessionalism is a form of consociational power sharing, meaning that governmental structure is arranged according to religious/ethnic lines and based on deep-rooted social divisions (Salloukh 2024). Davie (2022) argues that religious diversity can contribute widely to social progress. However, according to established scholarship, multi-sectarian Lebanese confessionalism has resulted in fragile and unstable state institutions, which challenge the state welfare and fail to attend to the needs of the non-elite (Calfat 2018; Salloukh 2024). The consequences of this apparatus have been studied, as priorly mentioned, especially its result in the Lebanese Civil War shortly after gaining independence in 1943 (Salame 1986). Yet, what induced the institutionalisation of sectarianism is often overlooked. The paper argues that the roots of Lebanon's sectarian politics lie in the colonial legacies of the French Mandate. Therefore, it is necessary to analyse how the Mandate cooperated with the Lebanese elite, and, by doing so, coordinated this mode of governance.

Scholars have extensively documented various aspects of the French Mandate in Lebanon. For example, Abi-Rached and Diwan (2022) and Santer (2019) analysed the economic legacies of the French Mandate in Lebanon. Geukjian (2023) explored the historical and political ties between the French and the Lebanese since the 19th century. Ishani (2012) examined women's political struggle in the French Mandates.

However, all these valuable investigations still fall short on the crucial reverberation of the French colonial institution: the assembly of an independent, confessional Lebanese government as the impetus for sectarianised post-colonial politics. The closest to an analysis regarding the legacies of the French Mandate on Lebanese governance can be found in Adel's research from 2022. This study discusses the violent political consequences of colonial rule. Yet, its focus remains too broad to evaluate the colonial roots behind sectarian politics and the post-colonial dynamics between the Lebanese citizens and their politicians in detail. Hence, previous literature regarding the French Mandate fails to adequately address its legacies on post-colonial politics as a pivotal area of analysis.

While existing literature predominantly focuses on socioeconomic outcomes, this paper adds a unique dimension by examining the influence of the French Mandate specifically on sectarian dynamics in post-colonial Lebanese politics. In contrast to the

studies that have failed to discuss how colonial authority can shape modern governance and that have failed to link the current status quo of the country to colonised Lebanon, this paper seeks to demonstrate how the Mandate has set in motion the sectarianisation of the political framework by modern Lebanese politicians.

Preliminary Context

Understanding the origins of the French Mandate is important for the interpretation of the modern political framework of Lebanon. After World War I, the Sykes-Picot Agreement (1916) allocated former Ottoman regions in the Levant between British and French colonies, with France gaining control over Mount Lebanon, a Maronite-dense territory. This development strengthened the ties between the pro-French Maronite Church and the French administration (Adel 2022, 8).

Yet, the historical ties between the French and the Maronites predate the Mandate. In 1249, King Louis IX of France vowed to protect Maronites through a letter addressed to Maronite patriarchs and bishops, particularly in light of the crusades (Gül 2015, 9). In 1649, the king of France appealed to that in his own letter to the Maronite Patriarch, ordering French ambassadors to assist them under the Ottoman Empire (Beggiani 2003, 36). In short, France was a main supporter for Maronites during Ottoman times.

After the Empire's dissolution, the Ottoman-drawn borders of Greater Syria were dismantled. With the deconstruction, Lebanon's borders were officially expanded in 1920 when French General Henri Gouraud, the first High Commissioner of the Levant (1919–1922), announced the creation of Greater Lebanon. Opposition, particularly from the new concentration of the Muslim population upon the new expansion, demanded a unification with Syria under the basis of pro-Arabism (Fayad 2020, 39–41). This demand for unification fostered social tension among the Muslim and Christian populations. However, the French administration and Elias Peter Hoayek, the 72nd Maronite Patriarch of Antioch, dismissed this opposition. Moreover, Maronites were no longer the religious majority, as demographic shifts continued to occur throughout the mandate.

These demographic shifts are majorly attributed to the migration of Lebanese Christians into the Lebanese diaspora and the migration of Palestinians to Lebanon (Traboulsi 2007, 114). Nevertheless, in 1926, a constitution was drafted for the future Lebanese state. Still followed through to this day, the amended constitution granted Maronites the claim of state leadership in the name of their numerosity and their embrace of Francophonia (Fayad 2020, 40; Mallo 2019). The Lebanese Republic became a semi-

autonomous state under French supervision in 1926 as a Levant Mandate and adapted a confessional structure of government based on religious distribution. This power-sharing arrangement aimed to maintain a delicate balance among the various religious communities in Lebanon. However, this confessional system would later become a source of political instability and sectarian tensions in the country.

Out of all confessional states, Lebanon is a particularly intriguing case with 18 officially recognized sects among a population of approximately 5 million people (Central Intelligence Agency 2023). Although the exact numbers are unknown and disputed, demographic shifts indicate that Muslims constitute the majority, followed by Christians and the Druze. It is worth noting that while the Druze are often considered part of the Islamic religions, some sources regard them as a separate religious group (Minorities at Risk Project 2005; Das et al. 2016).

Not only is the parliamentary distribution in accordance with religious boundaries, but state positions in the executive and legislative branches are held by leaders who belong to the respective sect in charge of the position. This has made the state sensitive to demographic changes, foreign interventions, and military imbalances (Calfat 2018).

Table 1 illustrates the geographical concentrations and parliamentary seats allocated to various Lebanese sects (Collelo 1987[1]; Fayad 2022; Khalife 2015). The confessional system in Lebanon distributes power among the major religious groups, where they all share specific numbers of seats in parliament. The current ratio of Muslims (Sunni and Shiite) to Christians (Maronites as a majority) regarding parliamentary seats is 1:1, with the Druze being considered amongst the Muslim population.

[1] While Collelo (1987) is admittedly dated, more recent scholarly works and demographic studies suggest that the overall patterns of geographical distribution among Lebanese sects have remained relatively stable since the late 1980s, as with Minorities at Risk Project (2003), Minorities at Risk Project (2005), and Minority Rights Group International (2008). Finding more current, comprehensive data on the geographical distribution of sects has proven challenging, as most recent sources focus on electoral statistics by district rather than providing a detailed breakdown by sect. Including updated information would likely require citing a separate source for each of the 16 officially recognized sects in Lebanon, significantly increasing the number of references needed to address this topic.

Table 1. Geographical Concentrations and Parliamentary Seats of Lebanese Sects

Religion	Sects (Khalife 2015)	Geographical Concentration (Collelo 1987)	Parliamentary Seats (Total: 128) (Fayad 2022)
Islam	Sunni Muslims	Sidon, Tripoli, Akkar, West Beirut	27
	Shiite Muslims	Southern Lebanon, Western and Northern Bekaa, Southern Suburbs of Beirut	27
	Alawites	Jabal Mohsen, Tripoli, Akkar	2
	Ismailis	Minority	-
Christianity	Maronites	North Beirut, North of Mount Lebanon, South of North, Governorate Southern Part of South Governorate	34
	Greek Orthodox	Ashrafieh (Beirut), Douma (Batroun), Dhour El Choueir and Mansourieh (Matn) Anfeh, Koura	14
	Greek Catholics	Beirut, Zahle, Suburbs of Sidon	8
	Armenian Orthodox	Bourj Hammoud (Beirut), Al-Matn District, Zalka (Beirut)	5
	Armenian Catholics	Bourj Hammoud (Beirut), Al-Matn District, Zalka (Beirut)	1
	Evangelicals	Beirut	1
	Syriac Orthodox	-	1 (Christian Minorities)
	Syriac Catholic	-	
	Nestorian Assyrians	Achrafieh (Beirut), Jdeideh (Matn), Zahle	
	Roman Catholics	-	
	Copts	-	
	Chaldeans	-	
Druze	Often considered an Islamic sect by itself and often a standalone.	Mountains of East and South Beirut, villages such as Falougha, Beit Mery, and Brummana	8
Judaism	-	Wadi Abu Jamil (Beirut)	-

Source: Compiled by Author

Institutionalisation of Sectarianism during the French Mandate

Religious Biases by the Colonial Administration

French colonisers strategically allied with specific religious groups, predominantly the Maronite Church. This strategy not only heightened sectarian tensions amongst the population but also perpetuated an unequal distribution of resources and representation within religious groups. The legitimacy acquired for the basis of colonial rule was the formation of a representative state of the "national people" who resonated with Francophonic culture. Thus, it was Arab Christians who were held in high esteem by the French administration, branding them as more "civilised" (Provence 2021, 116). Correspondingly, Lebanese Christians were in favour of British and French colonial rule as they were withheld in high status positions, prevailing over the remainder of the population (Fayad 2020, 39–41). While Arab Christians called for pro-Western relations, the Muslim population continuously advocated for a unification with Syria and the creation of a strong Arab nation. The divergence between national causes nurtured sectarian tensions, seen through the restrained Arab revolt by the French when the formation of Greater Lebanon was announced in 1920. This formation intercepted a legitimate backbone to oppose the French Mandate and deployed a situation to be exploited by the French. Hence, identity bias by the colonial administration fostered the existence of opposing religious factions, which will later outline Lebanon's governance structures.

The borders of Greater Lebanon were not directly constructed upon declaring its formation; it was likewise a question under the subject of the creation of a Christian state under French protection, an ideology evolving as "Lebanonism" or "Christian Protectionism" (Traboulsi 2007, 85–87). To control the rebellious Sunni population, General Gouraud's administration kept them outside major cities to hinder the spread of pan-Arabist ideology. In 1921, French Prime Minister Aristide Briand suggested separating Tripoli, which had, and still has, a significant Muslim population, from Lebanon and integrating it into Syria. This proposal aimed to maintain the security and Christian character of the newly established Lebanese state (Traboulsi 2007, 86).

The segregation of Muslims from executive positions in favour of Maronite elites fuelled religious resentment in the region. The declaration of the State of Greater Lebanon in 1920 was accompanied by the establishment of the Administrative Council (later known as the Representative Council) with two-thirds of Christian partakers. This disproportionate representation of Christians in the council led to the Muslim boycott, which compelled the

French administration to expand the council from fifteen to seventeen members to dilute the Christian presence by including more Muslim representatives (Traboulsi 2007, 88). Despite this concession, the Maronite Church and Patriarch Hoayek continued to exert significant influence over administrative affairs. The office period of High Commissioner Maurice Sarrail (1924-1926) saw efforts of reconciliation with the Muslim population, but these attempts were largely unsuccessful. Sarrail aimed to reduce inequalities in taxation between the residents of the annexed territories and Mount Lebanon, and he also opened administrative posts to Muslims and proposed a secular and public education system. However, most of Sarrail's reforms were dismissed by the French Foreign Ministry under pressure from the Maronite Church (Traboulsi 2007, 89). The Maronite Church's ability to influence French policy decisions during this period demonstrates the extent to which the French Mandate relied on Maronite support and how this alliance contributed to the marginalisation of other religious groups, particularly Muslims. The occupancy of Maronites on top of the social hierarchy during the French Mandate exacerbated adversarial relations between religious factions. As a consequence of these developments, the Muslim population felt increasingly disenfranchised and resentful of the preferential treatment given to Maronites.

Christians used their numerical majority as a justification for their claim to political domination. Alongside the French colonial agenda, they ignored demographic shifts in territory. The census of 1932 confirms a slight majority, with Maronites constituting 28% of Lebanon's population (Mallo 2019). The overall ratio of Christians to Muslims was 402.000 Christians to 383.000 Muslims. However, this demographic distribution would change significantly in later years. Despite the tenuous nature of their numerical advantage, Maronites claimed the presidency with the drafted constitution of 1926—the constitution that would later serve as the foundation for the Lebanese Republic. Lebanon's independence in 1943 was thus achieved with the officialism of the *fait accompli*, established during the French Mandate period. More so, it included the Maronite presidency and the confessional distribution of political power.

The National Pact of 1943

The strict dichotomy between the political interests of Christians and Muslims decreased as the Mandate years passed by. Particularly as of 1936, the association of Christians with Lebanonism and Muslims with unionism was no longer accurate. The controversial actions of the French administration, such as the suspension of the constitution in 1932 and the French monopoly on the national economy, swayed the pro-French attitude

of the Maronite Church (el-Khazen 1991). Anthony II Peter Arida, the 73rd Maronite Patriarch of Antioch (1932-1955), began to forge closer ties with Syrian leaders, a move that was criticised by some Sunni unionists. Bechara al-Khoury, a prominent political figure who would later serve as the first president of the Lebanese Republic, was one of many Christian politicians advocating for an independent Lebanon, built in collaboration with the Muslims of the population (Traboulsi 2007, 95). Although Muslims took longer to dissolve their aspirations for Syrian unification, the continued negotiations between Lebanese representatives and French administrators aided the convergence of the present political agendas. Riad al-Solh, a Sunni patron and politician, who preferred to be separate from Muslim unionists, endorsed inter-sectarian alliances with Christians against the French Mandate (Traboulsi 2007, 99).

After these developments, the Treaty of Friendship and Alliance between France and Lebanon, signed during the year 1936, recognised Lebanon as an independent state. Yet, this independence was not ratified by the French government (Khadduri 1944, 603). Instead, it was the National Pact of 1943 that was the guarantee of Lebanon's independence, constructed as the only formula to ease sectarian tensions within the population and as a promise of self-determination.

The developing relational dynamics were formally adopted in the early 1940s, with the condition of a total consensus on recognising the Lebanese Republic as an Arab state and the conversion of Christians' pro-West attitude into Arab nationalism. The acceptance of these conditions for independence by both parties is credited to external influences from Syria, where meetings were held to support Maronite candidate Bechara al-Khoury as president and his acquaintance Riad al-Solh as Sunni prime minister in 1942 (el-Khazen 1991). Although the National Pact is an unwritten agreement and a strategic arrangement between Lebanese elites, the constitution states that there is no legitimacy for any authorities to contradict the "pact of communal existence" (US Department of State Office of International Religious Freedom 2019, 6). The National Pact establishes the following (el-Khazen 1991):

- Maronites must cease seeking Western interventions and accept Lebanon's Arab identity.
- Muslims must abandon the goal of unification with Syria.

The National Pact also stipulates that key positions in the Lebanese government and military must be allocated to specific religious communities:

- The President of the Republic must always be a Maronite Catholic.

- The Prime Minister must always be a Sunni Muslim.
- The Speaker of Parliament must always be a Shia Muslim.
- The Deputy Speaker of Parliament and the Deputy Prime Minister must always be Greek Orthodox Christians.
- The Commander of the Lebanese Armed Forces must always be a Maronite Catholic.
- The Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces must always be a Druze.
- There should always be a ratio of 6:5 of Christians to Muslims (including Druze) in the Lebanese Parliament.

With the National Pact, Greater Lebanon gained independence in 1943 and became known as the Republic of Lebanon. The pact laid the foundations for a confessional political system, which was based on the assumption that it was the only means to achieve social harmony in a country with diverse religious communities. However, this arrangement was built on two critical assumptions that would prove to be problematic in the long run. First, the National Pact assumed that the region's demography would remain constant over the years, with Christians maintaining a slight majority. Second, the National Pact was presented as reflecting the standpoint of the entire nation, despite being an informal agreement negotiated by a small group of elite politicians.

Utilising Sectarian Grudges for Power Acquisition in Post-Colonial Lebanon

Religious Quotas in the Parliamentary System

The constitution and the components of the National Pact, which were established upon Lebanon's independence, did not permanently satisfy the Lebanese population. The Palestinian-Israeli war, which sparked up in the late 1940s, led to an increase in the Lebanese Muslim population due to the influx of Palestinian refugees (Perera 2021). The majority of these refugees were Sunni Muslims, which upset the delicate confessional balance that underpinned the Lebanese political system and led to attempts at demographic manipulation. For example, in the 1950s, Maronite President Camille Chamoun permitted Palestinian Christians to apply for Lebanese citizenship to boost the concentration of Lebanese Christians in the state (Ghandour 2017, 66). This move was seen as an attempt to maintain Christian political dominance in the face of changing demographics.

Moreover, the divergent political aspirations of Muslims and Christians in post-independence Lebanon further exacerbated sectarian tensions (Perera 2021). On one hand, many Muslims, particularly those who were sympathetic to pan-Arabism, desired to join the United Arab Republic (1958-1961). Led mainly by Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser, the UAR was a short-lived political union between Syria and Egypt. On the other hand, many Christians sought to maintain close ties with Western allies. Their interests manifested through President Chamoun, whose pro-Western policies amidst rising Arab nationalism triggered the 1958 crisis in Lebanon (Sorby 2000, 87). Violent protests erupted in Muslim cities, such as Tyre, voicing support for the UAR against Chamoun (Sorby 2000, 91). Fearing the fall of Lebanon into pan-Arabist hands, Chamoun seized on the Eisenhower Doctrine (Sorby 2000, 89), a U.S. foreign policy that enabled Middle Eastern states to request economic or military U.S. assistance amidst the threats of the Cold War. The crisis exemplified conflicting visions for Lebanon's political and cultural orientation. Coupled with the growing demographic imbalance and the perceived inequities of the confessional system, it serves as an illustration of how sectarian tensions escalated between Christian and Muslim communities. The failure to address these underlying grievances and to adapt the political system to changing realities would ultimately lead to the outbreak of the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990).

The confessional distribution of parliamentary seats based on religious affiliation has led to the sectarianisation of postcolonial Lebanese politics, with major political parties being arranged according to their respective sects. The Taif Agreement in 1990, which marked the end of the Lebanese Civil War, amended the National Pact. The treaty decreased the representation of Christians in the parliament from a 6:5 ratio to a 1:1 (Perera 2021). Furthermore, it stipulated that citizens who do not list their religious affiliations on their national registration cannot hold a seat in parliament, a measure designed to maintain equal representation of sects in the legislature (US Department of State Office of International Religious Freedom 2019, 7). This strict adherence to religious quotas has hindered the emergence of strong political representatives capable of transcending sectarian boundaries. The focus on identity-based politics has often overshadowed substantive policy debates and made it challenging to build consensus on critical issues. A recent example is the 2023 conflict over the switch to daylight saving time, which created a sectarian dilemma between Muslims and Christians (Homsi 2023). Muslims, who fast during the holy month of Ramadan, preferred to keep standard time to shorten the fasting period, while Christians favoured the switch to daylight saving time. As a result of this sectarian political environment, political

leaders often exploit sectarian grudges as representatives of their respective Lebanese sects, and major political parties are known for the sects they represent.

The way the four major sects are represented within the major political parties provides an illustrative example of how religious identity has become a core component of political representation in Lebanon:

- **Amal Movement and Hezbollah:** These two parties are the main Shiite parties in Lebanon. Beyond their political agenda, their supporters rely on these parties for representing Shiite ideology in parliament. Hezbollah's long-term maytyred leader, Secretary-General Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah, has attracted supporters not only through militant rhetoric but also through his Islamist message (Blanford 2022).
- **Progressive Socialist Party:** Although officially secular, this party mainly consists of Druze members and serves as the major representative of the Druze sect in Lebanese politics. It is led by the Druze Jumblatt family, which was a politically-dominant feudal family in Mount Lebanon in the nineteenth century (Francis and Perry 2017).
- **Lebanese Forces and Free Patriotic Movement:** These Christian-based parties have the largest shares in parliament. Consisting of mainly Maronites, they are representatives of Christian ideologies, such as Lebanese nationalism and Christian democracy.
- **Future Movement and Islamic Group:** As Sunni-based parties, they act as the representatives of Sunni Muslims in Lebanon's confessional politics (Abdel 2008).

In sum, the confessional framework for Lebanese politics was fabricated as a condition of independence during the French Mandate, allegedly to ensure the segregation of sectarian resentment from political reform. However, this system has paradoxically hindered the separation of religious identity from politics, and it has empowered political leaders to act as representatives of their respective religious communities. By doing so, this system perpetuates sectarian divisions and undermines the development of a more inclusive and national political debate.

Patronage Networks for State Welfare

The institutionalisation of sectarianism into the governmental system of Lebanon crippled the state's ability to provide for its citizens (Gardiner 2015, 2). The Lebanese

population hence resorts to patron-client relationships with political leaders to ensure the deliverance of their basic needs. Unlike common clientelist systems, which tend to keep government agencies outside their apparatus, patronage networks in Lebanon do not exist outside the sectarian governmental structure of the state (Gardiner 2015, 12–14).

During the French Mandate, clientelism was the primary source of political power (Gardiner 2015, 13). The feudal families became integrated into the system as politicians, while maintaining client-patron relationships with members of their respective sects (Gardiner 2015, 13). For instance, Sunni elites, who dominated the trade in coastal areas, arose from prominent merchant families. To participate in the political system, these elites became patrons to their local populations while delivering a pan-Arabist agenda in coastal conferences, which were held to push for a unification with Syria (Traboulsi 2007, 81).

As Lebanon gained independence, these existing patron families assimilated into the parliament and ministries, further entrenching the sectarian nature of the political system. In this context, the role of the client became crucial: to vote for and endorse their patron's agenda. This client-patron relationship, based on sectarian loyalty and the provision of services and benefits, became a fundamental feature of Lebanese politics, especially with the economic crackdown of the state. The inability to access basic services has forced the Lebanese communities to resort to patron-set charities and institutions. For instance, Najib Mikati's Azm'e Saade Foundation in Tripoli rivals state services by providing welfare for families in need (Knudsen 2020, 212). It fortifies the support of the impoverished Sunni families for Mikati, a Sunni politician who has served as the prime minister of Lebanon. Hence, with the state's incapacity to respond to citizen needs, patronage networks replaced state welfare and became private sponsors for the needs of clients with similar religious affiliations. The provision of healthcare and social services is the case in point. About 17% of medical centres and dispensaries are run by Christian charities and 11% by Muslim charities (Cammett 2011, 5). Sunni and Shia parties account for about 7% and 8% of all basic health care institutions, respectively (Cammett 2011, 5).

Hezbollah, though a militant group, exercises a substantial amount of soft power. According to Simon Haddad's (2013) research, 88% of respondents confirmed that they have received certain types of aid from the Shiite political party. The testimony of a hospital worker at Ragheb Harb Hospital in the predominantly Shia city of Nabatieh highlights the role of sectarian political parties in providing social services to their constituents:

> Ninety percent of the patients who go to the Hezbollah Ragheb Harb Hospital in Nabatieh are in the party. If you don't have papers from Hezbollah or connections to it, then you

> don't get help from Hezbollah and you go to the Nejdeh hospital instead. (as cited in Cammett 2011, 15)

The findings from the 2008 national survey in Lebanon further reinforce the significant role that sectarian political parties play in providing social services to their constituents. According to the survey, 63% of respondents who benefited from food and cash handouts reported that they received these benefits from a political organisation (Cammett 2011, 8).

This form of patronage is another indirect legacy of the French Mandate. As the French colonial administration relied on cooperation with sectarian elites, such practices continued after independence. This historical continuity reveals a pattern where contemporary political parties continue to build and sustain sectarian-based patronage networks, effectively leveraging religious identities for the sake of gaining political power. They lead to passing the control of political parties down to family members to ensure that patron-client relationships remain stable, such as the Jumblatt Druze family, which chairs the Progressive Socialist Party in Lebanon (Francis and Perry 2017).

The Fragmentation of Lebanese Identity

Various forms of nationalism emerged during the French Mandate. Whether Lebanese nationalism or pan-Arabism, nationalist ideology was distributed along sectarian lines (Salame 1986). The French Mandate's emphasis on sectarian identity promoted a fragmented sense of Lebanese nationality, where loyalty to religious affiliations often took precedence over allegiance to the nation. Moreover, the French identity would become interlinked with the Lebanese mainly in Christian communities (Fayad 2020, 40). These inclinations led to a distorted, disunited Lebanese identity.

Many people in today's Lebanon have gone through an identity crisis. Some Lebanese have sought to distance themselves from the Arab identity by emphasising their connection to the ancient Phoenician civilization (Tutkal 2022). This identification with a pre-Islamic, Mediterranean heritage has been used to assert a distinct Lebanese identity, separate from the broader Arab world.

Furthermore, major political parties have aligned themselves with specific religious communities to secure political power. As a result, politicians prioritise the interests of their respective sects over national consensus, which strains the possibility of constructive political reform. These endeavours are a major contributor to the existence of sectarian-based patronage networks, as well (Traboulsi 2007, viii). Sectarian political groups often exploit historical narratives, where each group presents itself as a defender of historical legacies, garnering support and trust from their respective communities.

Table 2 compares two major Lebanese political parties, Hezbollah and the Lebanese Forces. They correspond to different religious affiliations and diametrically opposed ideologies.

Table 2. A Comparative Analysis of Two Adversarial Lebanese Parties

Party	Religious Affiliation	Ideology
Hezbollah	Shiite Islam	Anti-Western imperialism. Pro-Syrian. Main historical narrative: its successful fight against Israel (1980s, 2000, 2006, 2024) and the protection against imperialism (for example, the fight against US-backed Syrian extremist groups in Lebanon like Jabhat al-Nsura in 2017) (Nerguizian 2018).
Lebanese Forces (LF)	Christianity	Lebanese nationalism. Pro-Western. Main historical narrative: protection of Christians in Lebanon (for example, with the fight against Palestinian Muslims in the Lebanese Civil War) (Nerguizian 2018).

Source: Compiled by Author

However, it is important to note the following: while these parties contribute to the confessional system that fosters sectarianism, the legitimacy of their interests depends on the context of the situation at hand. For example, one might argue that Hezbollah threatens the sovereignty of the Lebanese state every time it engages in military warfare against Israel. This challenge can be seen with Hezbollah's armed intervention in the Palestinian-Israeli war following the events of October 7, 2023, when the Palestinian Resistance group Hamas launched an attack against Israeli residencies. Hezbollah's military presence could be viewed as a strategic necessity to deter Israeli military incursions during and after the Lebanese Civil War. This illustrates how the legitimacy of Lebanese political parties and their actions is often shaped by historical context and circumstantial needs.

The polarisation of Lebanese identities has grown so far as to introduce a fairly recent ideology into the current political setting: Lebanese federalism. The seemingly growing divide has led to the advocacy of a federal Lebanese state. This federal segregation would be based on religious sects, in which Shia Muslims, Sunni Muslims, Christians, and the official sects in general each receive a specifically designated area of land under federal law (Rabil 2023). To have such ideology in post-colonial times is a manifestation of the Mandate's legacies. The aftermath of institutional bias by the colonial state has made the century-old debate over Lebanese borders resurface. As Lebanese identities continue to diverge, questions about Greater Lebanon's borders and unity remain central to contemporary political discourse.

Although the confessional system implemented in Lebanon was to enable the peaceful coexistence of Lebanese sects, the fragmentation of Lebanese identity was an ultimate legacy of colonialism, which was projected onto a political dimension, harbouring sectarian tensions amongst the nation.

Alternative Perspectives: Regional and Geopolitical Factors

Some analysts argue that foreign influence for geopolitical purposes is the main reason for fuelled sectarian tensions between the Lebanese people (Center for Preventive Action 2024; Ghoble 2018; Noe 2021). They point to examples such as the Palestinian presence in Lebanon, the Syrian endeavours prior to the Syrian conflict, and/or regional Iranian hegemony.

For instance, the Syrian presence in Lebanon, which was most prominent in the 1970s till 2005, is often regarded as a significant contributor to the sectarianisation of Lebanese politics. After the Lebanese Civil War, the Treaty of Brotherhood, Cooperation, and Coordination formalised cooperation between the two countries, enabling Syria's influence on Lebanon's foreign policy and security fields. According to Bassel F. Salloukh (2005), the treaty legitimised Syrian overlordship in Lebanon, where Syrian intelligence officers influenced Lebanese institutions, appointments, and electoral outcomes, suppressing opposition and controlling elections.

Prime Minister Rafic Hariri, who had been in conflict with the Syrian regime, planned to challenge Syria's influence through the 2005 parliamentary elections. However, before these elections could take place, Hariri was assassinated in February 2005. His death, combined with mounting international pressure, ultimately forced Syria to withdraw its forces from Lebanon. It divided Lebanese political parties into two main factions: the March 8 Alliance (which consisted of pro-Syrian parties such as Hezbollah, the Amal Movement, and the Marada Movement) against the March 14 alliance (which consisted of anti-Syrian parties, such as the Democratic Left, Future Movement, the Lebanese Forces, and the Progressive Socialist Party). The Free Patriotic Movement was a part of the March 8 Alliance, yet their strategic relationship concluded in 2013 (Ajami 2019; Global Security 2021; Sensenig-Dabbous 2009).

These alliances are an important factor for the demonstration of the sectarianisation of Lebanese politics. The parties are not at all distributed based on Christian-Muslim sectarian connotations. While major Christian parties allied with the Sunni Future Movement, Shiite-Sunni sectarian tensions increased (Ajami 2019). Parties within these

alliances often portray themselves as defenders of their sect's interests, reinforcing the perception that political representation was, and still is, intrinsically tied to sectarian affiliation. More so, these parties seek to secure their constituencies' loyalty through confessional identity, which reinforces the idea that political power is determined by religious affiliation, contributing to the sectarianisation of Lebanon's electoral landscape. However, as the French Mandate institutionalised divisions on a governmental dimension, tensions would manifest on an institutional level, as electoral campaigns and the selection of a Lebanese president often revolved around sectarian interests.

The analysis of geopolitical influence in the Middle Eastern region is valuable for understanding how sectarianism continues to be a prominent aspect of Lebanese society post-colonialism. However, it is important to recognize that the institutionalisation of sectarian conflict in Lebanon can be largely attributed to the legacies of the French Mandate. The confessional power-sharing arrangements put in place during the Mandate period have had a profound impact on Lebanese governance, shaping the development of sectarian political parties and the distribution of power along religious lines. While regional powers have certainly exploited Lebanon's sectarian divisions for their own interests, the underlying cause of these divisions can be traced back to the colonial legacy. The French Mandate's emphasis on confessional identity and the codification of religious representation in the political system laid the groundwork for the sectarianisation of Lebanese politics. Had the interests of the Lebanese population not been so closely intertwined with religious representation, it is possible that the threat of foreign influence could have been overcome through a united national identity. However, the mandate's institutionalisation of sectarian divisions in the governmental structure of Lebanon has made it difficult for such a unified identity to emerge.

The legacy of the French Mandate can be seen in the continued prevalence of religious representation in parliament, the existence of religious-based patronage networks, and the fragmented nature of Lebanese identity. These factors have all contributed to the perpetuation of sectarian conflict and have made it difficult for Lebanon to develop a strong, cohesive national identity. While other factors, such as regional geopolitical tensions and internal power struggles, have certainly played a role in the sectarianisation of Lebanese politics, the French Mandate emerges as a central catalyst for this process. The colonial legacy of confessional power-sharing and the institutionalisation of sectarian divisions have had a profound and lasting impact on Lebanese society and politics.

Conclusion

The legacies of the French Mandate on the sectarianisation of post-colonial Lebanese politics remains a multi-faceted intricate issue. While acknowledging other contributing factors, the French Mandate emerges as a central catalyst that set in motion the institutionalisation of sectarianism in the modern confessional structure of Lebanon.

However, it is crucial to recognise that while the French colonial administration played a pivotal role, it is not the sole determinant of the discussed outcome. Sectarian roots of the Ottoman era, external influences, and internal power struggles have also shaped Lebanon's political landscape. The sectarian dynamics of Lebanese politics are flexible and ever-changing, as seen with the development of the March alliances. What seems to persist is the relationship between the Lebanese citizens and the politicians who represent them. In this context, the French Mandate serves as a primary but not as an exclusive cause of the sectarianisation of Lebanese politics. With that said, understanding the legacies of French colonialism on Lebanese sectarianism can help shed light on the extraneity of the subject, in turn deflecting the sectarian conflict from its internal aspects to promote national unity in the country. When a polarised nation continues to be destabilised amidst sectarian propaganda, it is crucial to acknowledge the roots of the issue at hand as it can foster solidarity between the Lebanese, who have been wavering pointed fingers toward each other.

Additionally, future research that addresses different post-colonial societies and the complex socio-economic state of their respective regions could use comparative methods to examine the roots of sectarian conflict and promote civil unity. For example, such research could focus on the Balkan society to better understand its development post the Ottoman era. Indeed, the post-colonial Balkan populations comprise a diverse plethora of religious groups, each being favoured by a certain colonial power. The Ottoman's policies pushed for Islamic conversion, a strategy that was successful in both Albania and Bosnia. Russia and Austria, however, favoured Serbia and Croatia respectively in terms of Christian bias. These prejudices gave rise to sectarianism and nation-states based on, for the most part, ethno-religious identities, and it polarised the region. The similarity of this case with that of Lebanon becomes especially prevalent when looking at the influence colonial powers have in shaping sectarian dynamics—powers that significantly impact the course of political dialogue and order.

This paper examined the institutionalisation of sectarianism during the French Mandate through religious biases by the colonial administration and the National Pact of 1943. Such affairs were then linked to post-colonial Lebanese politics through the analysis

of religious quotas in the parliamentary system, patronage networks for state welfare, and the fragmentation of Lebanese identity. In essence, the French mandate has a far-reaching legacy in moulding the past, present, and the future of the Lebanese political scene. Essentially, the Mandate shaped the Lebanese political landscape, and it played a pivotal role in the founding of systemic sectarianism, inner sectarian conflicts, and the intricate confessional framework that still persists in Lebanon today.

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