The Patriarch, the General and the Doctor:
Opposing Visions for the Future of Lebanon.

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This report aims to analyze the ongoing quest for leadership of Lebanon’s largest Christian community, the Maronites, and by extension the future of the country at large. I will start with presenting what might be referred to as a common Maronite view of Lebanon and highlighting vital events of this narrative, proceed with an introduction of the three main “poles” followed by an analysis of the political developments of these three. I will discuss how they have reacted to current developments in neighboring Syria and the rise of Islamism as a major force there, and conclude with pointing at some possible outcomes of the current conflicts among the Maronites in particular and the Christian Lebanese in general.

The beginning

When I talk about a common view of the past, what I intend is a narrative of the origins of the Lebanese Christians in general, and the Maronites in particular, that is shared by many, probably a majority of Lebanese Christians. This narrative traces the roots of this community back to the Phoenician civilization 6000 years ago, and considers that those who became the Christians are the original inhabitants of the lands. Upon the arrival of Islam, the majority of its inhabitants were already Christians, with a considerable Jewish minority. With the arrival of Islam, groups of Christians started to move from the coastal plains, taking refuge in the mountains, where a number of followers of Mar Maroun, the spiritual founder of the Maronite Church, had already established themselves after fleeing from northern Syria.

Salibi points to an interesting historical fact here; the Maronite Church was established in opposition to the main Melichite church, as a rural revolt against the urban ecclesiastical control. He also cites the then newly established Moslem states failure to protect the rural areas as a main reason for the emigration of the Maronites to Mount Lebanon’.

Another inseparable feature of the Maronites’ narrative of themselves came out of this emigration, namely that of resistance. While many other churches of the East view their survival as churches in the face of the Islamic tempest as the result of a strong faith and Islamic tolerance, the Maronites contend that their survival was the result of adopting an ideology of resistance. “Rather than succumbing to the status as dhimmi – the Maronites rebelled and emigrated in search of religious freedom.

With this emigration yet another central feature of the Maronite narrative was incepted; the idea of Lebanon the refuge, a safe haven where one could freely practice Christianity. This idea is clearly present also today, and is often referred to when explaining the particularity of Lebanon.
A community not willing to give up its particularities, and who actively resisted rather than just submit to the forces of Islam. To this narrative one should also add the important factor that the very land of Lebanon is considered sacred, this was the lands on which prophets walked and lived, and where Christians have died as martyrs through history while defending their beliefs. Lebanon is not just a geographical entity or a physical given; rather it takes on an elevated dimension as being a divine religious experience.

This image of Lebanon has been carefully cultivated by the Church, and manifests itself in different ways. One example here is the tatwib, beatification, of Ya`qub al-Haddad, a Capuchin priest who died in 1975. This was the first time a beatification had taken place outside the Vatican, and the fact that it happened in Lebanon was a source of enormous pride for the tens of thousands of people who participated in the outdoor mass held at the Martyrs square in downtown Beirut. The mass was led by Cardinal Jose Saraiva Martins, head of the Vatican office for sainthood, together with patriarch Sfayr, himself also a cardinal. Different possessions of abuna Ya`qub, father Yaqub, was brought up on the podium where they were blessed by the two Cardinals. The atmosphere was festive, to say the least, but when a tiny cedar three was brought up for blessing the crowd exploded into cheering, shouting, applauding and crying of joy. People were hugging whoever stood next to them, congratulating each other with the beatification.

Refusing to be a minority

The above mentioned features and the narrative they present, makes it possible distinguish the Maronites as a sect, ta`ifa, as opposed to a religious minority, aqalliyya. This distinction might seem superfluous, but as will be shown later in this report it is of great importance when assessing the differences between the opposing poles vying for political influence and leadership over the Maronite community today.

One of the factors which distinguish a sect from a minority in Khoury’s definition is the rejection of Sunni rule and the control of state authority. As an extension of this, the sects have chosen to live outside the cities, unlike the minorities such as the Orthodox. Another factor is that of religious fragmentation as a result of their living in the cities subject to (Sunni) state control. The Orthodox are subdivided into Greek, Syriac and Armenian churches, based on national and ethnic origin.

With the arrival of the Crusades to the Middle East in the eleventh century, a process of incorporation into the Catholic Church began, and the Maronite Church formally became a part of the main Catholic body around 1180. The period after the union with Rome, and more specifically the sixteenth century when Pope Leo X used the phrase “flowers among thorns” to describe the Maronites, is referred to as “the era of reformation”. The Church, and not least its monastic orders, led an educational and agricultural modernization which further strengthened the Church and enhanced the image that the Maronite community had of themselves, as a continuity of Catholicism in the East, and as a community set apart from the other, mainly Muslim, communities of the region. The development of the educational institutions gave the Maronites an advantage when modern ideas of nationalism and independence were introduced, as an educated class of mainly Christian Lebanese adopted the idea of an independent, Lebanese entity where the Christians would play a leading role. And as we know the Church, first under patriarch Elias Huwayik and the formation of the State of Greater Lebanon, and then patriarch Arida, played a decisive role in the formation of the Lebanese State.

In line with the Maronite narrative of themselves as a sect, ta`ifa, unwilling to succumb to the surrounding Sunni state, they also refused to be part of the millet-system of the Ottoman Empire, which formally ruled Lebanon until 1918. The events which eventually led to the establishment by the French of Grand Liban could also easily be linked to the Maronites and their refusal to be treated as a minority; the introduction by the Sublime Porte of the Tanzimat in 1839. While clearly not intended to upset the social order of the feudal society of Mount Lebanon, it way taken by some as a sign that all subjects of the Empire should be treated as equals, regardless of religious affiliation. This united the different sects and denominations in demands political reforms.

However, for the Maronite commoners the situation did not change much, and in 1860 a rebellion broke out against the mainly Druze feudal lords of the Mountain led by the lay Maronite Tanyus Shahin. The result was a number of massacres against the Maronites, prompting not only Ottoman but also direct French and English involvement. The Ottoman influence diminished rapidly and
the French, by now projecting itself as the protectors of the Christians in the Levant, gained the upper hand. They continued to dominate this area, which following the defeat of the Empire in 1918 was formalized through the Mandate for Syria and the Lebanon.

The Christians in general and the Maronites in particular championed the idea of an independent state with a Christian majority, and refused to be a part of a larger, Muslim dominated Syrian state. But unlike what has been presented as a more or less universal Muslim desire to join Syria, recent research has nuanced this picture to a great extent, not least on part of another sect, the Shiites. Wess has shown how the Shiite 'ulama chose to work within the Ja‘afari courts established by the French authorities. Unlike Christian sects and minorities, Muslims sects were not recognized as separate millah by the Ottomans. Rather they were treated according to Sunni, Hanafi law, the official madhhab of the Empire. Thus the Ja‘afari courts were a most welcome recognition of the Shiites as law-school separate from the four Sunni schools. Not just due to their religious dogma, but also their pattern of behavior vis-à-vis the central authority, Khoury argues that the Shiites should be viewed as a sect rather than a minority. As such, it is not surprising that many Shiites preferred to stay outside the frame of a larger Sunni state such as the Syrian.

The republic of Lebanon

The Lebanese Republic, which gained independence from France in 1943, has from the outset adopted a consociational political system, where a National Pact from 1943, with added modifications from the Taif accord in 1989, forms the basis of this system. Political and administrative posts in the state bureaucracy are allotted according to a fixed formula, where each sect receives a given number of MPs and other positions. Following the amendments stipulated in the Taif accord, seats in parliament are now divided equally among Christians and Muslims, and then again subdivided between the different sects. Of the 64 Christian MPs, 34 are Maronites, 14 Greek Orthodox, (8 Greek Catholic, 5 Orthodox Armenians,), down to 1 Catholic Armenian, one Protestant and one to “minorities” such as Syriac, Copt and others.

This leaves us with an overarching question; who decides who represents who? From independence and onwards, on the Muslim, and to a certain extent also on the Christian, side, the question of representation was left to a number of notable families, the zu’ama, who would divide the positions among themselves, depending on which law governed the elections. Religious institutions on the Muslim side were relatively weak, not least among the Shia, and the zu’ama families such as the Salam, Solh and Karamis for the Sunni and ‘Usayran, Zayn and Asa’ads for the Shiites by and large themselves distributed the seats among themselves.

On the Christian side the picture is slightly different, in that the different Churches with their established hierarchies played a more active role in politics, not least the Maronite Church and its Patriarch. Securing the favor of the Church could be a make or break for potential contesters, and it also played an important role in trying to unify opposing positions and politicians, to keep the Christian unity in the face of the Muslim side. One should bear in mind here that this was the time of an emerging Arab nationalism, which most Christians wanted to keep at an arm’s length, and that the “unity” that was referred to consist of preserving Lebanon as a state detached from the conflicts in the region.

Another important factor is the early emergence of political parties on the Christian side, and while parties such as the Kata’ib, NLP and the National Block were to a certain degree the political expressions of families, Gemayel, Chamoun and Edde respectively, they also represented different political positions, and they introduced a political culture where organized entities, i.e. the parties, formed the core.

With the end of the civil war in 1990, new political actors emerged along the older parties and families. Again the question of representation came to the fore and different tactics were employed to project a picture of true representation. The war had a profound effect on this question, not least among the Shiites, where Hizballah had emerged as the strongest force, marking a complete break with the zu’ama class. AMAL on the other hand, while also emerging during the war, tended to pursue a policy of coopting members of the zu’ama, while also giving positions to persons with no family record of political involvement.

A parallel development could be observed on the Christian side, where Michel Aoun and Samir Geagea emerged as the expressions of leaders surfacing during the war. While having in common that none of them belonged to the old established families, with a record of producing politicians, their sources of legitimization differed.
Post wisaya politics

At the time of the Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon in the wake of the assassination of former premier Rafiq Hariri in 2005, the Christians in Lebanon, and the Maronites in particular, were in an extremely weak position. Their political leaders were in exile or in prison, their parties either dissolved or marginalized, or as was the case with the Kata’ib party, taken over by pro-Syrian forces. At the time it was the church and its patriarch who embodied the resistance to the Syrian tutelage, his status made it difficult if not impossible for the Syrians and their allies to harm him in any way. It did not, however, stop them from launching fierce attacks against him, which in the end proved counterproductive as his status with the Maronites was strengthened further and he was widely seen as the main opponent of the Syrian wisaya’, tutelage, over the country.

While the return of Michel Aoun from exile and the release of Samir Geagea from jail, following the Syrian withdrawal, were seen by many as a prelude to a Christian political revival, skeptics warned that Aoun’s return would initiate a period of division and confrontation among the Maronites, the main reason for this was the role played by Aoun in the last stages of the civil war, when he in his capacity as prime minister and commander of the armed forces launched an onslaught first against the Lebanese Forces and then against the Syrian occupation. Whether it was the return of Aoun or not which initiated this period is of course highly contested, but what could have been a revival of the Christians as a force setting the political agenda for a post-Syria period soon turned into a disaster for the Christian.

Samir Geagea

Geagea was the leader of a well-organized group, the Lebanese Forces, and drew heavily on the notion of resistance as a legitimizing factor. The LF projected itself as the Lebanese resistance, al-muqawama al-lubnaniyya, actively resisting attempts by the Moslem side to transform the Lebanese state into “yet another Arab dictatorship”. In doing so they could evoke a long history of Maronite resistance, not least against the policies of the Ottoman Empire. While supporting the Taif accord which ended the civil war, the party continued to oppose the Syrian influence over the country, by 1990 a de facto occupation. The Syrians on their side viewed LF as a threat to their position and vent on to imprison many of its leaders and dismantling and outlawing the group.

Post-wisaya, that is after 2005, LF and its leader Samir Geagea, has reemerged as a powerful force on the Christian side of Lebanese politics. The anti-Syrian and pro Lebanon first approach is still at the core of their politics, but unlike other movements and parties the LF has recast itself as a modern political party, modeled on European Christian Democratic parties, with an advanced party structure. The persona of Samir Geagea, and the legacy of its charismatic founder Bashir Gemayel, is important factors for LF in seeking legitimacy. But developing a functioning party structure was also a conscious decision for the party as a strategy to preserve the organization regardless who might be its leader, and as a way of preventing it from developing into a party dominated by families and the clientelist networks often associated with these14.

Michel Aoun

Michel Aoun on the other hand was a career officer in the Lebanese Army, and only rose to fame in the later stages of the civil war, as he became commander of the LAF in 1984. But Aoun could draw on some powerful sources of legitimization to muster support among his mainly, but not exclusively, Christian constituency. He represented the army, an institution revered by the Christians in general and the Maronites in particular as the very embodiment of the Lebanese State. In the consociational Lebanese system, the position of army commander is allocated to a Maronite, and is one of the highest ranking positions in the state bureaucracy. He carefully portrayed himself as the strong man, the commander, who had to take control when all others failed. He would protect the state, and more specifically save the Christians from an encroaching Syrian army whose mission was not only to crush the Christians, but also to make of Lebanon an Arab Muslim dominated state. This rhetoric touched a core among many Christians, and is to the present carefully employed by Aoun when legitimizing his FPM’s present politics.

After a sounding defeat against the Syrians, Aoun stayed in exile until March 2005, when he returned with his eyes on the presidency yet again. But during the years in exile controversy surrounding his ambitions had grown, not least among those who had stayed behind and taken the brunt of the Syrian repression of Christian political expressions. While being supported at the time by a waste majority of Christians, he was sidelined in the 2005 elections, when most
other forces allied against him, and he and his FPM were running alone. Still, he secured around 70% of the Christian votes, further strengthening his claim to be the representative of Lebanese Christians. But the reception he got from the other parties in the anti-Syrian coalition which was about to be formed angered Aoun and his followers. In February 2006, following secret meetings between Aoun and Secretary-general Hassan Nasrallah, a memorandum of understanding was announced between the FPM and Hizballah.

This understanding hit the Lebanese political landscape like a bomb shell, the general who had built his legacy on resisting Syrian influence in Lebanon stuck a deal with the most powerful Syrian ally in the country. Speculations at the time were ripe that the reasons behind the understanding had to do with Aoun wanting to promote himself as candidate for the presidency, an intention Aoun himself subsequently announced. But the reasons probably went deeper; the Syrian withdrawal had given Saudi Arabia and its allies, or those who were on friendly terms with the Kingdom, increased influence over Lebanese politics, much to the dismay of Aoun and the FPM.

The perceived Sunni threat...again

When I interviewed an academic who is close to Michel Aoun in the summer of 2012, he took upon himself to explain the reasons for the current political divide, and he somehow unexpectedly started by going back to the outbreak of the civil war, and even before that. In this view, it was an American wish to end the Christian dominance over Lebanese politics and promote the Sunnis. “They wanted to make Lebanon into a Sunni-dominated state, to include the Palestinians in this state and to convince then President Sulayman Franjiyya that there was no future for a Christian dominated state”. In his view this policy was supported by the Syrian and the Jordanians.

With the Israeli invasion in 82, and the election of Bashir Gemayel to the presidency the Sunni project was dealt a severe blow, *akalat darbe ‘awwiyye*. When Aoun took over as the leader of the army in 1988, it was with an idea that a strong army would be the only guarantee for a stable state, and as its commander Aoun was in a position to secure this. According to this view the Taif agreement which ended the civil war, was yet another episode in the plot, this time to remove both Aoun and the Lebanese Forces from the scene. As we know, the war ended, Aoun fled to France and Geagea was jailed, both events at the behest of USA, according to this academic. Following this view it is not Aoun who has changed his take on politics or his view of Lebanon and the region, the opposition to a perceived American supported Sunni strategy is still at the core of his policy. Rather, the Syrians have come to understand that they were misled by the Saudis and the Americans, and that they now, together with Iran and Hizballah from a bulwark against this Sunni plot, rather than a Shiite axis. Christians will be far better of within this framework than in a region of Sunni domination, and even Sunni Islamist dominated regimes.

They view Saudi policies in the region as a continuation of attempts to “normalize” Lebanon into an Arab state under their influence, thus allying the FPM with the other main opponent of Saudi Arabia is explained as a natural choice. But despite refusing the term “*half al-aqqaliat*”, alliance of minorities, pointing to the above mentioned motivation, there is a strong element of skepticism of Islam in general, and Sunnis in particular, among the FPM-supporters and Aoun himself. As Hizballah is more concerned with its own areas of control, the southern suburbs of Beirut, the Bqaa and the south, they have tended to leave the mainly Christian parts of the country to itself. This is taken by the Aounis as a clear indication that Hizballah intends to let the Christians run their own parts of the country, as long as these parts does not threaten the party’s strategy of clinging on to its weapons under the guise of being a national resistance force.

Lebanon first

Against this view are the perceptions of the present Christian situation represented by the Lebanese Forces. While sharing the initial opposition to an encroaching Sunni environment and what was perceived as the Lebanese Sunnis which to dominate domestic politics, the developments from 2005 and onwards in their view represents a clear departure from this wish to make Lebanon part of a larger Sunni dominated region. The assassination of Hariri accelerated a development among the Sunni population where the main component is that of the particularism of Lebanon and a will to put Lebanon, rather than Palestine or other topics, at the top of the agenda. The old slogan of Lebanon first, *Libnen awalan*, which was raised by the Christian parties at the onset of the Lebanese civil wars, was now fully adopted by the Sunnis as well. An example of this, proponents of this view will point to, is that the main Sunni block in the Lebanese parliament is called the Lebanon First block. “We always put forward this slogan, Lebanon first, and now they
adopted it. Should we then, after all this, say “ma beddna”, we don’t want to, after all20? This is how a professor of sociology, himself not a sympathizer of the Lebanese Forces, put it to me in a long interview I conducted with him.

This development, and the outbreak of popular protests in the Arab world in 2011, has led to a review of Lebanon and its position in the region. The Lebanese Forces have wholeheartedly supported these uprisings as an expression of democracy, not least in Syria, and Samir Geagea has even praised the latest policy document from the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria as an expression of democracy. He has also called on the Syrian Christians to wholeheartedly join the revolution20. Simultaneously, Michel Aoun has taken the exact opposite position, claiming that the fall of Asad will be a disaster for the Christians, as it would imply that the Muslim Brotherhood would take power. He has repeatedly lashed out at the Turks, Saudis, USA and the West at large for their stands on the Syrian crisis, and in an interview with Syrian TV in October 2012 he voiced his full support for Bashar al-Asad21.

The Church

The Maronite Church and its Patriarch has been an important actor on the Lebanese political stage from the outset, claiming a key role in establishing the republic itself. While sometimes acting more as a broker between opposing politicians, it has at other times taken on the role as an independent actor. Elected as Patriarch in 1986, Nasrallah Sfayr came to play a key role in post-wisaya politics. Informants in the Church would claim that this was done out of necessity, as the main Christian parties were operating underground; also pointing to the fact that it would be difficult for the Syrians and their allies to harm the leader of the Church22. While not engaging in party politics, after 2005 Sfayr became even bolder in voicing his views. For several years, he would personally lead the yearly mass at the Fouad Chehab stadium in Jounieh to commemorate the martyrs of the Lebanese resistance of the Lebanese Forces. Another episode in this respect is the famous interview he gave to al-Massira magazine a few days before the elections in 2009, when he issued a stern warning against voting for parties allied with Syria, a direct reference to Aoun.

The reasons for the mutual distrust and animosity between Sfayr and Aoun goes back to the end of the civil war, more precisely to the void left after the end of the presidency of Amin Gemayel in 1988. The prospects of holding elections for a new president were dim, and Gemayel gave Aoun, in the latter’s capacity as the head of the Lebanese Armed Forces, control over what was left of the state by appointing Aoun head of a military government. The patriarch was critical of this move, insisting on electing a new president who could proceed to form a civilian government23. Later on, in November 1989 following the election of Rene Muawad as the new president of the republic, the relationship between the two deteriorate from bad to disastrous. Sfayr supported the election of Muawad, thus provoking an unprecedented reaction from Aoun and his followers. Early in the morning Monday of November 6., demonstrators loyal to Aoun broke through the gates at Bikirki, the seat of the Maronite Patriarchate north of Beirut. They ransacked the compound, tore down pictures of the patriarch and replaced them with pictures of Aoun, and physically assaulted Sfay. He was forced to kneel and kiss a picture of the General, while the mob shouted insults against him24. That the relations between the two never recovered is not a surprise, and Sfayr was clearly dismayed by the alliance between Aoun and Hizballah25.

A new direction for the church?

When Sfayr retired in February 2011 and was replaced by Bishara al-Rayy, this initiated a marked shift in the policies of the Church. He quickly came to be viewed as much closer to Aoun, and his remarks about the Syrian regime being the closest one got to a democracy in the Middle East drew the ire of many Christian politicians26. He has also been very critical of the Arab uprisings in general, and the Syrian in particular, and reversed many of the decisions of his predecessor, reactivating the contact with Hizballah is one example of this27. His supporters, and others working within the Church who does not necessarily support his views, will claim that the motivation behind these moves is to position the Church as a mediator28. Given that Sfayr was so outspoken in his criticism of Syria and their allies, this operation would necessitate a re-approachement with Aoun, and to distance himself from the anti-Syrian coalition politicians29.

But his engagement in politics also differs from that of Sfayr in that he engages in what might be referred to as petty politics. He issues statements and comment on a wide variety of questions,
sometimes very sensitive ones; an example here is that he has warned against pressuring Hizbal-
lah to hand over members of the party indicted by the Special Tribunal for Lebanon in connection
with the assassination of former PM Hariri30.

Another contentious issue he has chosen to give much attention is that of Christian emigration. Time
and again he has warned that the Middle East will be emptied of Christians, and urged
Christians to hold on to their land and stay in Lebanon31. The problem with choosing to focus so
heavily on this question is that observers and actors on both side of the political divide agree that
this is not really a main problem for the Lebanese Christians today, on the contrary; all indica-
tions are that Muslims, both Sunni and Shiites, emigrate on a far larger scale than that of the
Christians32. A source close to Aoun told me that he had warned the Patriarch repeatedly against
pressing this issue, both because he saw it as a minor problem, if any at all, and also out of fear
that it would become a self-fulfilling prophecy33. His repeated lambasting of “the political class”
for being unable to secure the basic needs of the Lebanese has irritated actors and observers
across the divide, with the actors in particular pointing to the fact that it is a fundamental political
disagreement that is behind the current malaise34.

Another example of a problematic and failed involvement can be observed in the debate on a
new law governing elections. While all parties, and the Church, agree that the current law, often
referred to as the 1960 law, should be replaced, there is a profound disagreement as for what a
new law should look like. The main criticism against the 1960 law is that it does not secure true
Christian representation, in that many Christian MPs will be elected due to the votes of Muslims,
while only very few Muslim MPs are elected with Christian votes.

LF early in the debate issued a proposal where Lebanon would be divided into 50 districts, arg-
ing that this proposal would secure not only a much better Christian representation, but also
strengthening local democracy. This was opposed by FPM, who came to support a proposal re-
ferred to as the Orthodox law35. Under this law, each sect will elect its own representatives, but
while securing a “true” Christian representation, it would also cement sectarianism completely.
The idea of having mixed districts is a conscious one to try to compensate for the negative conse-
quences of the sectarian based system; making people of different sectarian background cooper-
ate to form electoral lists.

The Church seemed to be trying to mediate a solution, but came out as a supporter of the Ortho-
dox law, following a meeting at Bkirki attended by representatives of the FPM, LF, Kataib, Mara-
da and a couple of independents. The LF said that they would support it on the condition that it
was supported by all the Christians, well aware that it would not. Both the Sunnis and the Druze
rejected the law en masse, and this was probably also one of the reasons it was rejected by inde-
pendent, Christian MPs of the 14.Mach coalition. But the final blow came when the president also
rejected it, putting the Patriarch in an awkward position. It would be difficult for the Church to go
against the President, not least as the Patriarch tries to move closer to him and to strengthen the
position of the presidency itself as the foremost representative of the Maronites. Siting opposition
from other Christian lawmakers, the Sunnis and the Druze, the LF also withdrew its support for
the law, calling for a compromise.

The result of these developments is that the position of the Church, both as an independent actor
and as a mediator has been severely weakened. This is acknowledged by actors on both sides of
the divide, which will also point to the fact that the Church itself is unwilling or unable to come
up with its own proposals for solutions to such pressing problems as to agree on a new electoral
law. The Patriarch has refused elections on the basis of the 1960 law, but has failed to come up
with an alternative proposal. He is increasingly viewed as lacking a constructive approach, issuing
statements in all directions criticizing politicians and others for their failure, but failing to bridge
differences or in a constructive manner contribute to solutions. Thus the process of secularization
on the Christian scene is set to continue, and the influence of the Church on politics will probably
continue to dwindle.

The future of the Christians

The question then is in which situation does the Christian Lebanese find themselves in today? An
important outcome, which was pointed out to me by actors on both sides of the divide and by
academics I interviewed as well, is that the Christians today, as a collective, are far better off now
than at any time since the end of the civil wars in 1990. Both Sunnis and Shiites need a Christian
ally, thus placing the Christians in a favored position. Many of the academics I interviewed were
also highly skeptical of the strategy adopted by the Church, where a constant focus on the dangers of Christian emigration is a central component. “We have tried, in all our meetings with the Patriarch, to stop him from putting forth the claim that as a result of emigration the Christians are at risk of being completely sidelined. It just is not true. All indications are that Christian emigration has receded and that the bulk of the émigrés today are Muslims."

Another sign that the Churches position is weakening came from an academic whose hometown is Zahle. He claimed that up to 75% of the clergy was now non-Lebanese, and mainly Syrians. For several reasons it is not attractive for young Lebanese to become priests, not least the Church’s discouragement of marriage, a practice that was common earlier.

The election of Bisharra Rayy as the new patriarch must be said to represent a shift as for the policies of the Church. Even those who had worked closely with him in the years before his election, were surprised by the words he choose to characterize the Syrian system, that it was the best of the Arab regimes for the Christians, and by the warnings he came with as for a future Syria dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood. Some of those lay activists I interviewed, while clearly distancing themselves from his statements, said that it was still early to judge the new patriarch, and that what he did was to try to bring about a balance after the years under Sfayar’s anti-Syrian reign. When I interviewed the leader of Aylet Mar Cerbel, a gathering formed in the nineties who held weekly prayers for the release of political prisoners, he was one of those who proposed this take on it. Though as one of a generation of Christian activists who found in the Church a platform to express themselves during the Syrian reign, he was clearly troubled by the flow of statements emanating from Rayy. It should also be mentioned that Rayy was well known to the group prior to his election as patriarch, as he was the senior cleric set to supervise the group on behalf of the patriarchy. Despite their differences with Rayy, it would be unthinkable for them to leave the Church, rather, they continued their own activities including the preparations to launch a party, Lubnan al-Risala, Lebanon the Message. Whether they will be allowed by the Church to do this remains to be seen, personally I am skeptical about this possibility, as a political party directly or very closely linked with the Church would represent a breach with all conventions and imply that the Church would become a direct actor on the political stage.

There is no doubt that Lebanon, its Christians and the Church are facing a challenging future. Much will depend on the outcome of the Syrian crisis, but the core of the problems lies at home. A situation where the Church continues to involve itself in politics in the detailed way it does now, could very well further diminish its influence. While the political divide is likely to persist, the risk of it deteriorating into armed clashes between the different Christian groups is low, when Hizbollah turned its arms against its adversaries in 2008, the Christian areas were untouched, as an understanding between the FPM, LF and other concerned parties was reached almost immediately to keep out of the armed conflict.

Endnotes

1 Salibi, Kamal: *Syria under Islam; Empire on Trial 634 – 1097*. Caravan Books, Delmar New York 1977, p.30
3 Ibid p.158
4 I was present at the tatwib myself on June 22. 2008. For more on the occasion and how it was linked to Lebanon as the sacred land, see Al-Massira 1182, 23.June 2008: wasalna illa al-sama` matta ila al-watan! (We reached the heaven, when (will we reach to) the homeland!)
5 Khoury (1990) p.77
7 Khoury (1990) p.155
8 Salibi (1988) p.26

11 Ibid p.67

12 Ibid p.58


14 Interview with E.B. Ma´arab, Lebanese Forces HQ June 2012

15 An-Nahar June 19, 20, 23, 24 and 29 2009, the paper presented the detailed results of the parliamentary elections, based on the numbers provided by the Ministry of Interior. These were printed next to the results of the 2005 elections, and all numbers were broken down on the basis of sect. For example in Kisrawan Michel Aoun received 26 881 votes from Maronites in 2009, while he received 34 888 Maronite votes in 2005.

16 For the full text of the understanding, see Al-Agha, Yusif: *Hizbullah; Al-Tarikh al-idiuluji wa al-siyasi (1978-2008)*, *Dirasat `Iraqiya*, Baghdad 2008. P.488: Wathiqat al-tafahum al-mushtarak bayna hizb Allah wa al-Tayyar al-watani al-hurr

17 Interview with B.L. Jal al-Dib, June 2012

18 See also Daily Star October 15.2012: Aoun says US decision drove him into exile 22 years ago

19 Interview with M.S. Ashrafiyyeh, June 2012

20 Daily Star November 9. 2012: Geagea calls on Syrian Christians to join revolt

21 Parts of the interview can be seen in this clip from Youtube [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jMwLVvuNtXY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jMwLVvuNtXY) (23.03.2014)

22 Interview with Raymond Nader, Aylet Mar Cherbel, Naccache, June 2013


24 Associated Press News Archive 7.November 1989, by Mohammed Salam: *Aoun supporters attack opponents*. The attack on Bkirki can also be viewed on Youtube [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TnN5wJtL6i0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TnN5wJtL6i0) (20.03.2014)

25 US embassy cable 08BEIRUT48, 1.11.2008: [https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/08BEIRUT48_a.html](https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/08BEIRUT48_a.html) (20.03.2014)

26 *Daily Star* February 11. 2013: Rai’s Syria visit stirs up controversy

27 *Daily Star* July 15.2013: Bkirki, Hezbollah seek to diffuse tension over statement on arms

28 Interview with Raymond Nader, Aylet Mar Cherbel, Naccache, June 2012

29 Raymond Nader 2012

30 *NowLebanon* November 25. 2012: Rai against pressuring Hizbollah on STL suspects

31 *Daily Star* March 4. 2013: Maronite patriarch calls on Christians to remain in the region.

32 An-Nahar February 7. 2013: Al-nahar tanshar dirasa ihsa` iyya lafita´ an al-dimughrafiyya fi lubnani li al-lubnani lil-ma` lumat: Nisba al-masahiyyin istaqarrat wa sabada` bi-i-izdiyad li-taraj al-hijra wa ikhifad al-injab `anda al-muslimin (An Nahar publicizes a statistical study focusing on the demographics in Lebanon for (Statistics Lebanon): The number of Christians stabilizes and will start to increase due to reduced emigration and decrease in the birth-rate of the Muslims.)

33 Interview with B.L. Jal al-Dib June 2012

34 Interview with E.B. Mara´ab, Lebanese Forces HQ June 2012 and 2013
35 Aoun: Uqabbil bi lubnan da`ira wahida ma` al-nisbiyya ka badil lil-orthuduksi (Aoun: I accept (the idea of) Lebanon as one constituency with the proportional (representation) as an alternative to the orthodox), NowLebanon 23.02.2013

36 Interview with M.S. Ashrafiyyeh June 2013