



Institute for  
Social Justice and  
Conflict Resolution

Resilience and  
Inclusive Politics in  
the MENA Region

Online Commentary No. 4  
May 2021

## Elite Resilience in Lebanon at a Time of Deep Crises

Dr. [Ibrahim Halawi](#)

Teaching Fellow in International Relations  
Royal Holloway, University of London

### Elite Resilience in Lebanon at a Time of Deep Crises

Lebanon is grappling with its most severe crisis in modern history. The overlap of fiscal, economic, political, environmental and health crises is an arduous matter for any ruling elite, let alone Lebanon's sectarian leaders.

Paralysed by the vetoes of their own consociational arrangement, Lebanon's ruling elites have failed to take any decision or enact any policy to contain the crisis. They remain resilient, despite proving to be incompetent. Instead of slowing down the crisis, billions of dollars were funnelled out of the country. The currency's value has depreciated. People's savings have evaporated. Tens of thousands of jobs have been lost. Yet, the society remains largely passive.

In a historical sense, one would assume that this combination of political paralysis and economic collapse would existentially threaten ruling elites. Yet, in Lebanon, ruling elites continue to bicker and fight as if its 'politics as usual', while the country sinks further. What explains the resilience of Lebanon's post-war sectarian elites?

I argue that a large part of the explanation relates to the way the post-war sectarian state structured social and economic relations. Consequently, I will examine the social structure of post-war Lebanon, before delving deeper into what I consider to be deep contradictions between relations of consumption and production that contributed to the survival of what John Nagle has described as a [zombie](#) sectarian system.

### Structure of Sectarian Society

A lot of exciting work has been done towards understanding sectarianism in the Middle East. Not only has the literature moved beyond culturalist arguments about the ancient hatreds between religions and sects, but it also drew historically grounded links between elites and

sectarian politics. We now have a robust [literature](#) on the ways in which elites utilise sectarian identities to advance their narrow interests, and how this instrumentalization is hegemonized as authentic and deeply rooted, despite historical accounts proving otherwise.

Now, more attention should be given to the link between the state and sectarian communities. There are some [accounts](#) on how the two interacted in specific periods, but more work still needs to be done on consolidating these studies and delivering much-needed clarity on this relationship in post-war Lebanon. This pursuit is ever more pressing because states in the Middle East who govern over sectarian societies have either failed or are failing, according to mainstream indicators of modern governance.

Strikingly, in the case of Lebanon, this unfolding of state erasure has yet to lead to even the slightest transformation in power. The same sectarian elites maintain a tight grip on political, economic, and social affairs even when the state they have operated within has all but collapsed.

But the post-war state in Lebanon was not founded for the common purpose or function of other modern states, namely managing conflicting class interests and protection of capital; or as Nicos [Poulantzas](#) puts it, the state as ‘condensation of class forces’. The very tensions it was meant to manage are characteristic of a society organised vertically. The paramountcy of sectarian mobilisation in the region’s post-colonial societies, which, as I mentioned earlier, has been given enough thought in the literature, produced vertical mobilisation and identification, which structurally obviated class identification.

And so instead of ‘condensing class forces’, the state in post-war Lebanon condensed sects. It was designed to serve sect-based sharing of resources and power. In so doing, class-related mobilisation became obsolete, because the sectarian state is structurally unable to respond to class-specific demands. And since the state was not designed to manage class tensions, it subsequently did not function as a protector of capital either. The most salient examples of this are the depletion of people’s savings and bank deposits, the systemic mismanagement of state finances and debt, as well as the emergence of state-sponsored monopolies. This has been excused precisely because the function of the state – managed exclusively by sectarian leaders – has been to serve sects by extracting as much resources as possible to these communities, while framing this governing structure in liberal semantics of co-existence.

It made sense then for post-war civil society to operate in a language that the state ‘speaks’, and contest in forms and identities that the state can respond to through some sect-based reforms. Given that the social relations institutionalised in Lebanon’s post-war state are exclusively sectarian, both privileges and deprivation are in turn contested, implicitly or explicitly, in sectarian forms. In other words, when sect-based incentive structures (read: resource extraction) fall short, Lebanese subjects momentarily protest what they would

characterise as the absence – or legitimacy – of their post-war state, with the popular polemical question: *Wayn al-dawla?* (where is the state?).

By 2019, the Lebanese society was starting to feel the brunt of dwindling state resources, through the reduction of sect-based services and benefits. The state upon which sects relied to manage their conflicts and distribute resources amongst them was showing signs of bankruptcy.

In response, protests erupted in October 2019 across towns and cities simultaneously. This allowed people to let their sect-based guards down, knowing that the ‘others’ in different parts of Lebanon (hence different sects) had done the same. Consequently, protesters felt confident that their socio-economic demands were not implicitly serving ‘the other’ sects’ access to resources, because, they reasoned, every region in the country was itself demonstrating in the streets. This moment eventually was contained, when some sectarian guards were raised through a combination of sectarian provocation and co-optation. Additionally, containment was made easier because of structural weaknesses in forms of progressive opposition.

Whilst largely voicing revolutionary demands, the protesters were imagining different things. They disagreed on their reading of the problem – of why the state is not serving them well, and on their preferred solution – whether to ‘return’ to better days of sect-based resource extraction or progress to a different state. So, for many, the problem is that the post-war state has been ‘robbed’ by the sectarian ruling class. For others, the resources dried up because of Hezbollah, who extracted resources more than their fair share of the sectarian pact because its less concerned about the sustainability of the Lebanese state. Hezbollah is also blamed for the decrease in ‘international assistance’ (read: low-interest loans), because of the Lebanese party’s geopolitical stand-off with Western allies. Few, at that time, saw that the dire economic situation was less about sheer robbery by rulers, and more about the very nature of the post-war state and its economy, in which resources were extracted sloppily to bribe and buy sect-based loyalties, and consumption-driven profit became the grounds for every economic venture at the expense of developing export-oriented and productive sectors.

Of course, disagreement is healthy. But the nature of these disagreements reflects deeper differences on the role of the state in Lebanon. Over decades, the sectarian state reduced political life to the distribution of benefits through patronage and clientelism, and to individuals dodging the law through bribery and favouritism. These are relational phenomena, in which civil society engages in on daily basis across its sects. They are not exclusive privileges to the rulers, nor are they done without the involvement of the very same people that were protesting against ‘the regime’ in 2019. And so, a significant contributor to the resilience of sectarian elites, despite the crisis, is the historical distortion of statehood,

which was turned into an abstract concept that does not include, in its relational manifestation in society, the people themselves.

Furthermore, the monopolization of state legitimacy by sectarian leaders negated class-based identification and organisation. Even when people attempt to react to this collapse, they do so, based on an understanding of politics that impedes progressive alternatives of resource distribution and management. In other words, these social and material experiences with the sectarian state have limited the interest in, and imagination of, a radical transformation of the state and its legitimacy. And, instead, many reiterate the claim that 'Lebanon has always been like this'.

Today, the country has seen one of the [largest disappearance of wealth](#) per capita in the world. There are no dollars left in the state to serve sectarian clientelist networks. There are very little resources left to extract in the service of sects. Organised crime is rising. The sectarian state has proven that it can neither protect capital nor address the needs for an increasingly impoverished population. Yet, society at large continues to hold on to what it knows has worked before, assuming that it can work again through some regional or international grand bargain. Digging deeper into this careless distribution of resources and benefits allows for a more reasonable understanding as to why the majority of the Lebanese people are passively awaiting the revival of the same system: it was too lucrative.

### **Relations of Consumption and Production**

The liberal semantics of co-existence have been the main characteristics of Lebanon's post-war image, sold domestically and internationally; of different religious communities living together in peace. And relations of consumption that emerged as a result of the sectarian state's frantic resource extraction to its subjects gave this image a hegemonic significance.

The sectarian state has managed to secure enough hard currency to subsidize, and consequently incentivize, high levels of import-driven consumption through international loans, tourism, and expatriate's investments, deposits, and repatriation.

Of course, this import-driven economy came at the expense of developing its productive sectors. This same economy which encouraged Western consumption patterns to large segments of its society, preserved, simultaneously, pre-modern relations of production for the benefit of sectarian legitimacy of the state. Sectarian leaders continued to control and blackmail people with their livelihood, because they monopolized the state and, consequently, its process of resource distribution; be it jobs, access to schools, healthcare, and illegal business benefits.

In other words, Lebanon imported modern goods for consumption, without developing its means of production and labor relations. These same people who are locked into pre-modern clientelist relations were riding the wave of hyper-consumption, encouraged by low-interest loans from banks. They were encouraged to import luxurious cars, several of them in fact per household with average incomes. They were encouraged to buy imported brands to elevate their social status. They were encouraged to consume more in leisure spaces designed around commercial interests. They were encouraged to import cheap domestic workers under slave-like laws and covered most manual jobs through a large – and cheap – foreign labor force, which perverted class structures and encouraged racist and sectarian relations.

These inconsistencies between how and what society produced on one hand, and how and what it consumed on the other, have contributed to the distortion of political life, and by extension class relations, alongside the vertical organization of sects. It allowed most segments of society to live beyond its means, thanks to the sectarian state.

The only capital-intensive product that this post-war economy exported was its educated youth. And the parents of these thousands of young men and women did not correlate their hyper-consumption with the inability of their sons and daughters to find skilled jobs in their country, because the hegemony of co-existence did not present hyper-consumption for what it is: an economic trade-off. Instead, hyper-consumption was normalized and encouraged as a natural manifestation of any modern order.

Consumption, along with production, pronounces an individual's relationship with both the state and society, and largely delineates their views. Hyper-consumption is even more defining in an individual's social and political life. It has raised the bar of entitlement, and created a fragile middle class that, upon losing the high ground of consumption, came down tumbling into near-poverty lines. No wonder then sectarian elites remain resilient and society remains passive. The former has bribed post-war society, as Charbel [Nahas](#) describes this political economy, and the latter is yet to concede that it was deceived. But sectarian elites maintain their grip, since the post-war state condensed sects just enough to keep the social strings attached even after the state itself has been eroded.