

Pax Syriana: Elite Politics in Postwar Lebanon

Rola el-Husseini

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There has rarely been a dull period in Lebanon's post-Ottoman political history. Its central geographic, if not political, position within the Arab region, along with its penetrable political system, has made the country vulnerable to regional and international pressures. These pressures have manifested themselves in both spectacular (e.g., the civil war and Israeli occupation) and more subtle ways (e.g., the sustained brain drain and continued socioeconomic deprivation of rural communities). Despite these changes, however, the country's political system has remained resilient and the sectarian power-sharing system

forming the core of national politics and distribution of (formal and informal) political power has changed only in style, not substance.

Rola el-Husseini's inquiry into the country's political elite background, structure, politics, recruitment patterns, and discourses is layered against the resiliency of its confessional system. Her core concern is to trace the Lebanese elite's interactions and their major structural determinants. As such, the inquiry has to ask how the period of Syrian control – Pax Syriana – created new possibilities and limitations for elite politics in Lebanon. Thus, while the text is rich in historical analysis and sound in its treatment of Lebanon's postcolonial politics, the main period of focus is on 1991 to 2005, when Syrian influence was at its peak. As one would expect, Syria's influence on elite recruitment and this class' politics and discourses was profound during this period.

At the outset, the author makes an excellent case for studying Lebanese politics through elite interactions. The second chapter, which is dedicated to precisely this topic, introduces readers to “elite settlements” and “elite factionalization,” both of which define post-civil war Lebanon. El-Husseini divides this period into three stages. The first stage was the Ta'if Agreement, the actual elite settlement that formally ended Lebanon's civil war. Certain elite factions negotiated and compromised, while other elite factions, especially those that arose during the war, were sidelined and not part of the negotiating process. The second stage involved the gradual absorption of those elite factions willing to play by the dictates of Pax Syriana. This peace was formally consecrated in the Ta'if Agreement and interpreted by Syria and its elite allies in ways that provided substantial Syrian control over Lebanon's affairs. The third and final stage involved elite factionalization, whereby previously marginalized elite groups were co-opted into Pax Syriana and those unwilling to play by the rules remained on the peripheries of politics.

The discussion of this interaction is analytically interesting and very engaging. Viewing the rise of Pax Syriana through the lens of elite factionalization allows the reader to think concretely about the dynamics of consensus and disagreement among elites, which were mainly around fears of renewed violence and an acceptance of Pax Syriana, and how these broke down along confessional lines. It thus provides an important contribution to our understanding of elite politics in Lebanon and how various elite factions responded to the opportunities and challenges of Pax Syriana.

While el-Husseini's discussion of elite factionalization is analytically strong, the book's core, as presented in the following chapters, is more descriptive than analytical. In fact, it reads like a “who's who” of Lebanon's

elite. The arguments are strongest when they attempt to link elite activity (e.g., recruitment, political alignment, and discourses) to the broader institutional and political structures in which they are embedded. It is weakest in those chapters, such as the third one, where el-Husseini devotes a great deal of attention to describing the trajectory of Lebanese political parties. While the assertion that political parties lack ideological grounding and are used merely as vehicles for their leaders to retain power is important, the chapter's descriptions of them offers the reader very little in terms of concrete analysis. She merely identifies and elaborates on each party's history and positioning vis-à-vis various sectarian communities.

The fourth chapter, which deals with state elites and Lebanese political institutions, is a useful but not entirely sufficient corrective to the descriptive tendencies of the previous chapter. Here, el-Husseini contends that the functioning of Lebanon's state institutions is strongly shaped by the individuals who are at their helm. The ensuing survey of these individuals as a method to map the postwar elite enables the author to establish an important taxonomy of postwar elites that includes new businessmen, notables, technocrats, former warlords, and Syrian clients. The cross-sectarian phenomenon of corruption is given some attention in the chapter's latter stages to highlight the dysfunction of state institutions and the central role played by the elites in the country's economic and political stagnation.

Although el-Husseini maintains that institutional capture is a major strategy of the elites, she also acknowledges that non-state elites play an important role in Lebanese politics. These "strategic elites," namely, military commanders, religious leaders, and important journalists, are the focus of the fifth chapter. Here, she again concentrates on identifying and describing these strategic elites while downplaying or minimizing her analysis of the specific social and institutional milieus that give rise to them.

The emphasis on non-state elites is carried into the sixth chapter, which investigates emerging elites and the invisibility of women in Lebanese politics. The offered typology of emerging elites includes seven ideal types: the civil society activist, the technocrat, the academic, the local representative, the heir, young elites connected to political parties, and the nationalist militants. Their limitations and possibilities as regards affecting the country's distribution of power, or its sectarian system more generally, provides an interesting way to think about the current landscape of elites. While taking these possibilities seriously, el-Husseini strongly argues that the absence of institutions of elite recruitment, coupled with the resiliency (if not functionality) of the confessional system, make this unlikely. Similarly, the nature of

patronage and communal leadership precludes the entry of more women into the political elite.

Despite some of the shortcomings identified above, mainly concerning the author's tendency to focus on describing the rise and roles of individuals and political parties, this is a useful text for anyone interested in the structure and functioning of Lebanon's elites. This is particularly true of the final chapter's examination of elite attitudes regarding Syria and sectarianism. Perhaps the book's strongest chapter, it demonstrates the determinants of elite positions on key issues and the various communication strategies and choices between and among the range of Lebanese elites. As one may expect, the discursive terrain of Lebanese politics around Syria largely mirrors the former's political divisions. There is slightly more room for debate over sectarianism's future, with various models (including its abolishment) taken seriously by some of the country's elites.

The text is weakest when el-Husseini expands on the typologies she offers of the elite's various layers (e.g., state, strategic, and emergent). These typologies are sound and make logical sense, but are not as theoretically or analytically strong as they could be. This is not to suggest that the research needs to yield comparative insights about elite politics, but rather that describing the trajectory of elites and political parties does not yield the most substantive analytical insights about elite recruitment and circulation that it could. This is unfortunate, because her elaborations on the relationship among elites and institutions or political parties are excellent. These linkages yield interesting insight into questions about elite politics. But as they are not sufficiently or substantively developed, the reader is left sifting through sections of descriptive material about elite and institutional histories to find the text's more analytically rich parts.

While *Pax Syriana: Elite Politics in Postwar Lebanon* is useful and should be read by observers of Lebanese politics, it will be of most benefit to graduate students and those conducting research on contemporary Lebanese politics. It is particularly useful to anyone interested in the resiliency of Lebanese institutions in the face of such profound political inertia and stalemate in the current era. The role of elites is of course central to understanding this, but, as el-Husseini points out, their capture of institutions and inter-elite relationships provide a more nuanced understanding of contemporary Lebanese politics.

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