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## **Lebanon's Injured Identities: Who Represents Whom During a Civil War?**

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# LEBANON'S INJURED IDENTITIES WHO REPRESENTS WHOM DURING A CIVIL WAR?

*Ghassane Salamé* \*

## I

The ten-year-old conflict in Lebanon calls up at the very outset the fundamental problem of identity. This, of course, should not come as a surprise. Indeed, the notion that national identity in complex societies – going into what is generally called a process of modernisation – is attained with great difficulty, is widely accepted. As Lucian Pye defines it “The identity crisis involves the resolution of the problem of traditional heritage and modern practices, the dilemmas of parochial sentiments and cosmopolitan practices. As long as people feel pulled between two worlds and without roots in any society they cannot have the firm sense of identity necessary for building a stable, modern national state.”<sup>1</sup> This process of nation-building could not automatically follow the establishment of the modern state. Indeed, a long period of adaptation to the political framework and the reorientation of political socialisation to a state-dominated political culture were needed. And even so, the final result was far from guaranteed. Noting that this problem was as pronounced in some European societies as it was in the Third World, Erich Fromm had underlined the link between one’s attachment to a traditional group and the concomitant feelings of security thus generated: “The identity with nature, clan, relation gives the individual security. He belongs to, he is

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1. Lucian Pye, *Politics, Personality and National-Building: Burma's Search for Identity* (Yale: Yale University Press, 1962), p. 63.

rooted in, a structuralised whole in which he has an unquestionable place. He may suffer from hunger or suppression, but he does not suffer from the worst of all pains – complete aloneness and doubt.”<sup>2</sup>

The creation of modern Lebanon typically called for the transfer of an individual’s loyalty from a family, a sectarian, or a tribal community which provided the security of yesteryear, to an abstract and alienating structure – the State. To feel Maronite or Druze thus should have become archaic for passports stipulated that everyone had become Lebanese and had to feel as such. But this transfer was not simple: “The loss of the self and its substitution by a pseudo-self leave the individual in an intense state of insecurity. He is obsessed by doubt since, being essentially a reflex of other peoples’ expectations of him, he has in a measure lost his identity. He is compelled to conform, to seek his identity by continuous approval and recognition by others.”<sup>3</sup> The individual feels as though driven to live, in suffering, Rimbaud’s dilemma, rendered by Sartre in a famous sentence: “Je est un autre.”

The war in Lebanon is, to some extent, a savage expression of this dilemma, of the deep frustrations it generates and the aggressiveness which these frustrations produce. There is, at times, a sort of refusal to acknowledge the Other, a tendency to regard his origins with haughtiness and disdain and at the same time reject his desired status of citizen. If I recognise you as a Shi’i, it is only to scorn you; if I call you Lebanese, I still doubt your “conversion.”

This permanent flux regarding the issue of identity has become a constant source of irritation in Lebanon, particularly to those who harbour political projects. If they had hoped that the religious cleavage (Christian/Muslim) would become the determining factor of one’s identity, they were soon disappointed by the fact that many of their compatriots did not consider themselves sufficiently Christian or sufficiently Muslim. In fact, in order for me to better assert myself as a Christian, I am not only in need of the Christians’ solidarity, but also of that of the Muslims who define themselves as Muslims first, and can thus participate in the assertion of my Christian identity, in an uninterrupted game of mirrors.

The same applies to a lower level, that of the confessional community which is more restricted than the dualistic religious one (Christian/Muslim). To better assert myself as a Maronite, I must see other Lebanese define themselves as Greek Orthodox, Sunnis, Shi’a, and Druzes. If they define themselves more generally as Christians or Muslims, my specificity as a Maronite or a Druze, a Shi’i or a Syriac, is threatened. Thus those who harbour political projects based on the sectarian identity object to its dilution in a wider religious framework. Some Druzes might, for example, find that other Druzes

2. Erich Fromm, *The Fear of Freedom* (Routledge and Kegan Paul), 1960, p.29.

3. *Ibid.*, p.177.

identify too much with the broader Lebanese Muslims’ goals. The Sunnis might want to dissociate themselves from a Shi’a demographic boom, and some Greek Orthodox might feel the effects of the Maronites’ political hegemony and reject it out of a desire to preserve their own confessional identity.

The contradiction between these two levels (the religious and the communal) can become acute. Both Christianity and Islam are proselytising religions – witness the invigorating effects that new conversions have on them in various parts of the world, or their sometimes acute rivalry for the souls in Africa. But the communal-confessional spirit, on the contrary, springs from an atavistic attachment to a group, from an almost total lack of interest or suspicion about the possible conversion of the Other. Thus if the religion has an unquestionable missionary zeal, the confessional community turns inward, bound up in its past, proud of its identity and apprehensive about its future. The community is passive to the same extent that the religion is conquering.

Because proselytism seems little in evidence in Lebanon, one can conclude that communal spirit outweighs religious faith. Religious faith drives the believer to spread his identity and to constantly prove its superiority, or at least its truthfulness (true Religion in the medieval sense of the word, as opposed to the false messiahs and self-designated prophets). The confessional spirit is, on the contrary, a sort of parochial “tribal nationalism” to use Hanna Arendt’s expression, and it is particularly this kind of nationalism that now triumphs in Lebanon and nurtures the civil war. This is innately true for the Druzes who, from the beginnings of their sect, closed the doors of their community to new converts. But this has almost *become* true for the other confessional communities. The convert seems to be subjected to bitter condemnation by his community of origin and to contemptuous suspicion by his new coreligionists. The local Catholic clergy has, for example, found the European missionaries’ designs to convert to Catholicism not only oriental Muslims but even oriental Christians separated from Rome, both conceited and without hope. *Today*, everyone seems to be entrenched in his group, plunged in his confession, true to the imaginary nation. The Other is necessarily perceived as different and, since the war still rages on, as a deceitful and unbearable alien.

I have insisted on the word *today* because the situation has not always been so inflexible. One of the most negative aspects of the political system gradually established between 1920 and 1943 is that it inordinately reinforced confessional affiliation as the basis for one’s identity – an identity accepted not only by oneself and by the other but also by the State. Indeed, it was much easier to convert from one religion to another before this extreme politicisation. The politico-communal whole was far more fluid. Today, confessional polarisation has become so pronounced that the Lebanese try to forget that some Druze families converted to Christianity (one of them, the Abillama’, did so as late as