

Deconfessionalisation or reconfessionalisation?

Religion as a coherent identity-signifier in a changing
Lebanon

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Abstract

Political deconfessionalisation is a national objective for Lebanon, stated in the Taef agreement, the treaty that ended the 15-year long civil war. The consociational democracy, the model upon which Lebanon is based, suggests a political representation of all groups in a pluralistic society and in Lebanon these groups are the religious communities. The system is known as confessional and was viewed as an interim solution when Lebanon became independent, as its persistence was argued as harmful. However, the system is still prevailing today.

The process of deconfessionalisation is also known as national reconciliation and implies an institutional reform. This reform seems far away and the project of deconfessionalisation seems postponed indefinitely. Instead, analysts suggest that Lebanon is rather witnessing a reconfessionalisation with the political groups manifesting themselves even more along sectarian lines.

Looking at the formation of collective identities and its reproduction I will argue that religion remains a coherent identity signifier even when the Lebanese context is changing. If no alternatives to a religious identity are created, how will deconfessionalisation be possible?

Key words: Consociational democracy, Sectarianism, Deconfessionalisation, Identity, Religion, Security

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1 Introduction

In Lebanon, you are not first and foremost a Lebanese. You are a Christian, Druze or Muslim Lebanese. You are not any Christian Lebanese but you belong to one of the 13 Christian sects and you are either Sunni or Shiite Muslim. Your religious identity is revealed by your name or which part of the country your family comes from or which language you speak apart from Arabic. Although your religious identity is no longer manifested on your identity card, everybody in Lebanon will know to which religious group you belong.

When the fifteen-year long Lebanese civil war ended in 1989, the peace treaty, the Taef Agreement, outlined the power sharing formula that reigns in Lebanon today. The bloody fighting was manifested along sectarian lines and the peace treaty modified the system in place. While preserving the confessional model upon which the Lebanese political system was and still is based, the Agreement gave more political power to the Muslim groups and less to the Christians. The Taef Agreement institutionalised the power-sharing formula where all 18 religious groups in the country have political representation. Thus the Agreement recognises all the minorities in the country and seeks to protect them. Interesting enough, the Agreement also aims to address the source of inter-communal antagonism by stating *the abolishment of political confessionalism* as a basic national goal: “ The abolition of political confessionalism shall be a basic national goal and shall be achieved according to a gradual plan” (Taef Agreement 1989).

However, analysts would argue that instead of a *deconfessionalisation* they observe a *reconfessionalisation* of the Lebanese society (Crisis Group 2006: 13-15). When Rafic Hariri, the much loved and much hated Lebanese prime minister that symbolised the transcendence of sectarian divergences in the country, was assassinated in 2005, the reaction of the Lebanese people led to the withdrawal of Syrian troops later the same spring. The Lebanese spoke with one voice and for one national objective: the end of Syrian influence. In the political turmoil that followed, alliances between different sects were created and hopes raised that Lebanon would stand united and form a political agenda based on non-sectarian divisions. However, in 2009, the son of Rafic Hariri, Saad Hariri, won an important electoral victory that showed a re-manifestation of the power of his religious group, the Sunni Muslim community. Coming back to the issue of deconfessionalisation, analysts talk again of one of the biggest challenges for the Prime Minister; to reverse sectarianism, the very system that helped him to power (Crisis Group 2010: i-ii).

But is it possible that Lebanon, who recognises the confessional system as the very fundament of the power sharing in the country could actually go towards an abolishment of the latter?

1.1 Confessional system and religious sectarianism, a problem?

“The more confessional the society becomes the more the need for deconfessionalisation is apparent “ (Salam 2006, interview Beirut). The Lebanese Constitution from 1926, the National Pact and later the Taef Agreement outlines the Lebanese political system as a power sharing formula recognising the religious groups as the main political actors by giving them political representation (Picard 2002: 63-65). The confessional system was recognised as necessary at the time but experts warned against the persistence of the system evoking the dangers of confessionalism (Salam 2006:1). Therefore, all three documents also recognise the system as interim and outlines a plan for an abolishment of political confessionalism. A national committee should be established in order to study the abolition of confessionalism, but as this has not yet happened the process is postponed indefinitely (Russell 2005: 143)

What does political deconfessionalisation mean? Already here there is room for different interpretations. Dagher would argue that the Muslim communities in Lebanon want to suppress confessionalism only in politics and that they still favour its impact in societal life. Contrary to that is the standpoint of the Christian community who argue that if confessionalism is to be abolished from politics, its impact on civil and social life has to diminish as well (Dagher 2000: 167). Another interpretation, mainly from the established political elite in Lebanon, is that *politicians* should represent the sects and the confessions but that *politics* has to transcend confessionalism (Salam, 2004: 76).

The process of deconfessionalisation is also known as a national reconciliation process and is aiming to build a common citizenship of the Lebanese people (Russell 2005: 139-150). Hence, a citizenship that transcends religion, where the Lebanese have equal rights, opportunities and obligations regardless of their religious affiliation.

Most analysts would agree that the confessional system is harmful to Lebanon. It renders the country weak to outside influence as the different sects seek support from outside groups and as Lebanon itself offers an attractive terrain for external powers to spread their influence. This could ultimately divide the country even more (Salam 2006:1-2, Phillips 2009). The confessional system is also seen as creating a hierarchical system where Lebanese belonging to a religious group higher up in the hierarchy enjoys more privileges than Lebanese belonging to a religious community further down in the system. In order to be elected to public office you rely on your sectarian identity and therefore loyalty is of highest importance. This weakens the sense of solidarity among the Lebanese and adds to social differences and conflict as well as damages the democratic credibility (ibid). Imad Harb argues that, for a while, the confessional system, allowing the religious communities to have mutual veto powers, actually helped to make Lebanon an open and tolerant society. However, he sees that today's troubles within the country stem from the interaction between this formula and the regional dynamics (Harb 2006).

1.2 Aim

Now if the abolishment of political confessionalism is an aim for Lebanon, both stated as a national objective for the country and with the system considered as harmful, is it happening? Or is there rather a reinforcement of the confessional system? What are then the mechanisms behind this trend? How come confessionalism is reinforced?

The discussion in previous section pointed in some degree on the complexity of the question. How should political deconfessionalisation be understood? Should the political processes be transcending confession while politicians' continue to represent the sects or must it be looked at in a broader sense, that the confessional aspect should also be abolished from other levels of society?

In order to find a way to approach the question of deconfessionalisation I would like to introduce the notion of identity. The sectarian system in Lebanon is characterised by politically represented groups that identify themselves in terms of religion. The religious identity has become the only identity through which you gain political and hence official recognition.

As Lebanon will remain a pluralistic society, the process of deconfessionalisation will have to take place taking this dimension into consideration. Looking at the model of democracy of which Lebanon is an example, the consociational democracy, we will see that one of the conditions for political stability is that overlapping memberships or loyalties are created (Lijphart 2008: 26). Hence, I would argue that if the Lebanese people identify themselves as a Shiite Muslim or a Christian as opposed to Lebanese without religious connotation, there is a risk that they will continue to favour the interests of their respective sect, also on a political level, and in the words of Lijphart, political stability could not be ensured.

Therefore, I would like to look at the mechanisms behind the identity formations that would hinder the creation of a Lebanese identity beyond religion.

Why is religion the identity signifier that seems to be strongest prevailing in Lebanon today? How are the boundaries in the different religious groups in Lebanon reproduced and rearticulated? And so, why is sectarianism so prevailing in Lebanon today?

1.3 Method and material

Aware about the complexity of the Lebanese question and the extensive literature on the subject, this thesis has no intention on drawing any revolutionary conclusions and I remain modest to my findings. Having spent a lot of time in the country I have always been fascinated by the history and the people and I find it interesting how religion transcends every part of society and how difficult it seem to get rid of the identification of both old and young people in terms of religion. Although you don't talk about, it is

always present. When Hezbollah took to the streets of Beirut in 2008 they put up roadblocks and asked people for their religious identity, something that had not happened since the civil war.

The study is mainly based on second hand sources, but in addition to that I have carried out some qualitative interviews during one of my stays in Lebanon. However, the interviews only serve as a reinforcement of a hypothesis or phenomenon already observed. In a few cases, the interviews also made me aware of aspects I had not taken into consideration.

As focus in this thesis lies on the identity creation, my main literature has been on different identity theories and how they have been used in different analysis. I have in particular been studying identity theories that explain how group-identities are formed.

Lebanon needs to be understood as a feudal society where traditional, strong families has played a vital role and formed the political elite. This is why I find it interesting to analyse the identity formation through the emergence of a new identity, an alternative to the traditional one. The new identity is the Shiite Muslim identity, institutionalised in Hezbollah. I argue that the emergence of this new identity has created more division along sectarian lines although this was never the intention of the “party of God”. To prove that hypothesis I need to look at how the other religious groups have manifested themselves in relation to this “other”, this new political actor.

Now, my aim is not to look at the process of deconfessionalisation from an institutional perspective, nor is it to try and find alternatives to the confessional system. The Taef agreement already outlines an institutional reform in order to achieve national reconciliation, which in turn should favour the process of political deconfessionalisation. However, this object has not been fulfilled, nor has the reform started (Russell 2005: 144-145) and I will not further analyse the prerequisites for such an institutional reform. What I will do, instead, is to look at the institution in the identity formation. Institutions, of all types and not only formal ones, play a crucial role in the stabilization and reproduction of identities (Cerrutti 2001: 8). As such, I can analyse the reproduction of religion as an identity signifier and why it remains coherent in a changing society.

Further, in order to analyse why religion is such a strong identity signifier, I will, with the help of Kinnvall, look at the concept of security in identity formation processes (Kinnvall 2004: 741-763).

2 The Lebanese model

We need to define some of the terms and concepts that will be used and referred to in this thesis. What is the consociational model upon which the Lebanese political system is based? How do we define confessionalism and what is the origin of sectarianism?

2.1 Consociational democracy and confessionalism

At the very origin, the creation of Lebanon was contested. You can even find different versions of history in different educational books. In the aftermath of the fall of the Ottoman Empire, a decree creating Greater Lebanon in 1920 was a first step towards the modern-day Lebanon. France was the pushing factor to create “Greater Lebanon” and hence ruined the dream of many Sunni Muslims in the area, to reunite Lebanon with Syria. The Christian Maronites, the other big political community and by tradition always protected by France, also had to realise that they were never to belong to Europe.

The new society, a French mandate in which different religions and local loyalties nourished the pluralistic political culture, needed institutions to legitimise its existence (Picard 2002: 63-65). The Constitution from 1926 adopted the communal political system, giving an unequal representation between Muslims and Christians, favouring Christians, the ally of the French.

The second institution to define Lebanon as a country is the National Pact from 1943, the year of independence. The National pact is the very basis of the confessional system in Lebanon; confessional because the power sharing formula in Lebanon, the communal system, is based on the religious groups. Already in 1959, confessionalism was implemented into the civil law and recently, new laws in Lebanon have allocated more power to the different religious groups in terms of personal status and family relations (Salam 2004: 82-94). The Constitution even guarantees the “equal representation of the communities in the public service and in Ministries” (Picard 2002: 64).

To understand the power sharing formula and to look at its challenges we will use the model of the consociational democracy (Lijphart 1977, 2008).

The consociational democracy has, in its essence, four elements (Lijphart 1977: 25):

1. Proportional allocation of political posts among communities according to their numerical representation in the population;
2. A grand coalition between communities' leaders on common policies that serve all;
3. Communal autonomy whereby each community is free to determine its own affairs such as personal status laws; and
4. Mutual veto power, so that any decisions deemed detrimental by any community can be voted down

The system also requires a conducive environment to be able to function well and offer the political stability that it is aiming to offer (Lijphart 2008: 32). The consociational democracy demands of the leaders of the different segments in the plural society to at least feel some commitment to the unity of the country as well as to democratic practices. However, at the same time they must also maintain the loyalty from their own followers (Lijphart 1977).

To ensure political stability in such a system, Lijphart argues that overlapping memberships, or loyalties, should be created (Lijphart 2008: 26). This could be linked to the discussion of overlapping identities, where in a plural society, creating overlapping identities could hinder the institutionalisation of one identity and the reproduction of only this identity that could be harmful to cross-communal relationships (Russell 2005: 160). In Lebanon this could be translated to the necessity of creating identities that cross over the religious boundaries, in order to guarantee political stability.

The system in Lebanon gives all 18 religious sects political representation. To guarantee top representation to the largest groups, the National Pact states that the President always have to be a Christian, more specifically a Maronite, the Prime Minister always Sunni Muslim and the speaker of Parliament always Shiite Muslim. The Taef Agreement institutionalised the power sharing formula already outlined in the National Pact, but also redistributed the power amongst the religious groups. It represented a fundamental change in the official of government from a presidential structure to a more collegial form of government dominated by the Council of Ministers. This meant that the President lost some of his power in favour of the Prime Minister and it changed the political balance by equally dividing the seats in Parliament instead of the 6 to 5 ratio to the Christians that was the system in place (Taef Agreement 1989: II). Criticism towards the consociational model mostly considers it to strengthen the divisions along sectarian lines.

2.2 Sectarianism and its perpetuation

The Lebanese model is hence known as confessional, but one could also talk about religious sectarianism. As a communal political system, divided along religious lines, what reigns in Lebanon today is referred to as religious sectarianism.

So where does sectarianism come from? We need to have some kind of understanding of the origins of sectarianism to understand its perpetuation. We know that the system is institutionalised in the different agreements that constitute modern-day Lebanon, but where does it come from originally? Makdisi argues that sectarianism was not defined in Lebanon from one day to another and that it is not because of the strong religious faith that the power-sharing in Lebanon is divided along religious lines (Makdisi 2000: 6-10). He argues further that firstly, sectarianism is a practice that developed out of, and must be understood in, the context of the 19th century ottoman reform. Second, it is a discourse that is scripted as the Other to various competing Ottoman, European, and Lebanese narratives of modernization. The collapse of the old regime, Mount Lebanon, an area smaller to modern-day Lebanon, that was based on an elite hierarchy not defined along religious lines, opened up the space for a new forms of politics and representation based on the language of religious equality. This transformation privileged the religious communities rather than elite status and so sectarianism emerged, as a practice and as a discourse (ibid). Makdisi argues further in his book that throughout the years, since the fall of the Ottoman Empire, sectarianism has emerged through the interaction between a religious mobilisation as well as violence and institutional development (ibid).

The civil war is often considered as a factor that reinforced religious sectarianism, or confessionalism (Salam 2004: 75-96) The Lebanese sociologist Salim Nasr argues that already at the beginning of the war, the inter-communal violence that broke out forced displacement of previously heterogeneous groups, which created a more segmented pattern of living and hence reinforced confessionalism. He also mentions other factors to the reinforcement, such as growing economic differences, income inequalities and immense corruption. With the inability of the Government to solve the situation, people have become more dependent on new sectarian leaders that offer an alternative to the traditional politicians (Hanf et al 2003: 39-49). According to him, few men and women of real stature has had opportunity to develop as political leaders and hence it attracts religious figures that are prepared to criticize corruption and also advance a convincing normative model for a religiously rooted society. The revival of religious institutions and leaders as illustrated by the strong influence of the Christian Patriarch Nasrallah Sfeir, the Sunni Grand mufti Muhammad Rashid Qabbani and the leader of the Islamic Shia Council Sheikh Abd al-Amr Qabalan, has played a big role in the perpetuation od sectarianism (ibid).

Another factor that has been important in the emergence of an even more sectarian political landscape is the regional development as well as the Syrian influence. The political ascendancy of the majority Shiite community in Iraq has heightened the shared identity in of Lebanese Shiite to their brothers in Iraq. The rise of violent Sunni movements such as Al-Qaeda in Iraq, has encouraged Shiite Muslims across the Middle East to identify themselves in more sectarian terms (Salam 2006:1-3).

3 Theoretical framework

To be able to answer the question how the religious identities are reproduced we need to understand how religion is understood as an identity signifier.

Analysed through the primordial concept of identity, the religion would be seen as a given, essentialist characteristic of identity, static in its nature (Peterson et al 2003: 11-13). However, that does not take into consideration the dynamic creation of identity. If instead we approach identity from the perspective of social constructivism, this would allow us to explain the identity construction in the process of becoming and thus see the collective identity as something more than the sum of individuals involved (Kinnvall 2004: 748).

Hall argues that all identity formations, whether individual or collective, are constructed within a historical and social context. The contingency is a consequence of the constitutive emptiness in subjects: the subject lacks a stable, self-identical and solid core (Hall 1996: 3). This is line with Schotter's argument that identity does not have an essential core but rather evolve around situational, linguistic and narrative constructions of identity (Barnett 1999: 9). Here, the concept of narrative is introduced and Calhoun argues further that adding narrative is a way of avoiding the essential aspect of identity, as it has the ability to introduce time and space to the analysis (Calhoun 1994: 65). As such, identities will be viewed as changeable and not anything static. In other terms, identities could be viewed as the result of a range of social arrangements in which people construct shared stories (Tilly 2001: 3).

In this thesis, the focus is on collective identities and Neumann argues that the creation of group identities is always ongoing and always created in the relation to others (Neumann 1999: 4-7). Since identities then are primarily constituted by their difference to the 'other', no final permanency or immutability subsists (Laclau 1996: 52). The concept of the other implies that there are boundaries in the identity making process.

Using the paradigm of Tajfel we could argue that the social, collective identity is created in a psychological process and is based on the norms and patterns of actions that holds the group together. The actual process of creating a group and boundaries is what holds one group together and creates the collective identity and whether there are true differences or not between the groups is irrelevant (Peterson et al, 2003: 22f).

Now what does the role of institutions play in identity formation processes? Giddens sees a dialectic link between the structure and the individual that acts within a structure of rules and regulations, but he does not see the structures as independent from

the acts of the individual. Hence he sees the reproducing of identities as more of a psychological process than actually dependent on structures (Peterson et al 2003: 20). Cerrutti, on the other hand, argues that institutions, of all types and not only formal ones, play a crucial role in the stabilization and reproduction of identities (Cerrutti 2001: 8).

As for political identities, Tilly argues that identities become political when governments become parties to them. The different political parties decide who is on which side of the we-they boundary and Tilly argues further that identity claims are not primarily a form of self-expression but rather they constitute serious political business (Tilly 2001: 4). With the nature of the political system in Lebanon, where political representation is allocated along religious lines and the actual access to positions in the public sphere also are distributed along sectarian lines, the political identity has become equal to the religious identity. Unless this was the case, we would not be talking about the necessity of a political deconfessionalisation. However, the political identity as such will not be analysed further here, as we will look at the perpetuation of the religious identity. However, it worth mentioning that political identities are argued to be contingent, dependent on the actor's interaction with others and placed within an institutionalised context (Neumann 1999: 11-35), as such they should be changeable whenever the institutional framework changes. Neumann argues further that collective identities, and not only political, are not static but changing in relation to the institutional framework in which they are formed (ibid).

So how can we with constructivist identity theories explain the persistence of some identity categories? Why does religion remain coherent as identity signifier? Schatz would argue that the collective survives only with identifiable mechanisms of identity reproduction (Schatz 2004: xix-xxi). As such, the reproduction of religion as an identity signifier could be seen as the only identifiable mechanism and therefore explain the persistence its perpetuation.

But why is then religion the identifiable identity signifier? Introducing the concept of security, allows us to look at identity in terms of the ontological narrative which emphasis on the fact that collective identities can provide security in times of insecurity (Calhoun 1994: 62). As people feel increasingly uncertain about their daily life, the search for security takes on ontological and existential dimensions. I will argue, as does Kinnvall, analysing security as a thick identity signifier, we can then see how collective identities are formed in response to ontological insecurity (Kinnvall 2004: 748). Kinnvall argues further that religion is one identity-signifier that is more likely than other identity constructions to provide this security (Kinnvall 2004: 742).

4 Religion as an identity signifier

What has the emergence of a new actor on the political scene in Lebanon meant for the segmentation of a sectarian identity? The discussion below will look at the emergence of a new political actor on the Lebanese scene, a new religious identity. Further, we will look at the reaction of the already existing strong identities, the Christian and the Sunni Muslim identities in relation to the new one.

4.1 The emergence of a new identity

Formed around a religious discourse and with social revolutionary intentions (Norton 2007: 30-31, Qassem 2005: 9), Hezbollah, as a Shiite Muslim movement, offered a political alternative, both to the existing Christian and Sunni Muslim political identity, and to the old Shiite political class.

The traditional Shiite leadership was based, just like other traditional leadership in Lebanon, on a patronage system, but the Shiite community had very little political influence being an underdeveloped and impoverished community (Norton 2007: 12). Amal, a Shiite dominated party, existed already on the Lebanese political scene but the movement embraced many different ideological currents, were secular in its nature and had no clear hierarchy.

The Israeli invasion of southern Lebanon in 1982 contributed to the emergence of Hezbollah that grew into a resistance movement, inspired by Iran and persuaded to fulfil the dream of an Islamic revolution (ibid). Looking at the identity formation process, the establishment of a narrative constitutes one of the most important mechanisms by which a group constructs a collective identity (Barnett 1999: 12). The group constructs a storyline concerning their origins, the critical events that define them as a group, and some agreement about the direction they are heading (ibid). Created as a resistance movement, one of the critical events for the party was the withdrawal of Israeli troops from southern Lebanon in 2000 where the party could solidify its legitimacy as a resistance movement.

Further looking at the process of identity creation, self-recognition and the recognition by others is part of the process (Calhoun 1994: 20), and in the case of Hezbollah a first step of both self-recognition and recognition by others was when the party decided to participate in the parliamentary elections in 1992. It was seen as an opportunity not only to have access to political benefits, such as the allocations of posts in the public service, that are distributed along confessional lines, but also to be able to influence the politics and to gain official recognition. It is argued that this was when the Shiite community became political (Norton 2007: 101).

Using the cultural narrative to analyse identity formations, we would see the importance of rituals and cultural patterns in the creation of a collective identity (Calhoun 1994: 60). With the emergence of Hezbollah, religious commemorations were reinforced and aimed at showing the strength of the Shiite movement, by the discipline in the rituals and the numerous participants (Norton 2007: 58-68). As an example, the mourning of Ali, known as Ashura, became something a true Shiite should do. The rituals and cultural patterns are in this particular case religious and thus the religious collective identity is reinforced through the emphasis of such manifestations.

The process of forming Hezbollah as a political party was parallel with the development of a social network that the party came to offer. Woman's groups, schools and health centres were established and Hezbollah offered judicial guidance through the Islamic courts and economic support to families were the husband had chosen the destiny of a martyr (Qassem 2005: 60-61). Today, Hezbollah offers what the Lebanese Government failed to do, a good social security network to an underdeveloped community. As only members to the party can enjoy this security network and members have to embrace the Shiite religious beliefs, in practice, it closes the door to any other Lebanese of a different religion.

Using a social identity theory that explains the identity making process in terms of in-groups and out-groups and the creation of boundaries between these groups, these theories put the emphasis on social comparison and it is thus possible to analyse the relation between dominant and marginalised groups (Peterson et al, 2003: 22f). The Shiite Muslims always felt marginalised living in the neglected southern part of the country and although even Christian communities lived there, felt even more neglected than their Christian compatriots (Norton 2007: 105-110). This feeling of marginalisation could be seen as the origin of the creation of a group where the boundaries clearly were marked by the religion.

The public narrative explains identity as created attached to cultural and institutional formations, to networks of interpersonal trust and institutions such as the family and the church (Calhoun 1994:62). To further analyse the role of the religion here, I argue, as does Tilly, that the importance of the narrative depends on their institutional power; if the narrative is created by a powerful institution, it tend to be more influential (Tilly 2001:5). The above-mentioned institutions of Hezbollah, the social security network, are in large connected to one of the influential leaders of the movement, the Shiite cleric Fadlallah, and sometimes to the Islamic Supreme Court (Norton 2007: 108), which would then reinforce the sense of a collective identity based on religion. So here again the religion, in form of an institution could also play a crucial role in the formation of an identity.

The role of clerics and religious leaders is also of great importance when

analysing the formation of a Shiite identity. If we analyse the phenomenon in terms of ontological security we would see that with the emergence of a strong leader, different identities are arising or even seem to compete about the existence. Salim Nasr argued that as few men and woman in Lebanon had the opportunity to emerge as political leaders, it attracts religious figures that are prepared to criticize the government and also advance a convincing normative model for a religiously rooted society (Hanf et al 2003: 39-49). Musa al-Sadr, the Shiite cleric that disappeared in 1978 and whose destiny up until today is unknown, is recognised as the most important figure in the emergence of a Shiite identity. He was opposed to the Christian, especially Maronite, political dominance and through the Islamic Council he issued demands to the Lebanese government. Demands of social improvements for the neglected parts of the country, which were never taken into consideration (Norton 2007: 18-19). As such, even before the occupation of southern Lebanon by Israel and the emergence of Hezbollah as a resistance movement, the Shiite community positioned themselves in relation to the Christian community.

The above-mentioned approach is closely related to *the ontological narrative* (Calhoun 1996: 62), which is interesting as it emphasis on the fact that collective identities can provide security in times of insecurity. As people feel increasingly uncertain about their daily life, the search for security takes on ontological and existential dimensions. The narrative hence, has been important in the formation of a Shiite identity.

Since the very emergence of the movement, Iran supported financially this group of young revolutionaries that later created Hezbollah, in their hope of creating the "Islamic Revolution" (Hanf 1993: 34-35), Syria on the other hand wanted an ally in Lebanon in order to preserve its interests. Although Hezbollah never had the intention to create an Islamic state of Lebanon, and this would go against the Constitution of Lebanon, other groups in Lebanon does not feel close to a political party supported by an Islamic state. The continuous support from mainly Iran reinforces the alienation of Hezbollah from other communities in Lebanon. The war during the summer of 2006, the Israeli invasion that followed on Hezbollah's capturing of two Israeli soldiers, known to the Lebanese as the July war, solidified the role of Hezbollah as a resistance movement and gained some recognition from within the country, but it also served as a regional example of Muslim opposition (Norton 2007: 7) and hence showing it ties to the Muslim neighbours of Lebanon.

Looking at the dimension of security, Hezbollah offers a sense of security in times of insecurity. As Kinnvall argues, in times of insecurity people tend to seek towards the collective identity that more likely then other identity-signifiers provide the feeling of security, such as religion (Kinnvall 2004: 741-763). The other, being Israel, is not only a group in relation to which Hezbollah formed its own identity but signifies also a threat which in large could explain the strong identity formed around the party providing a sense of security. Looking at how narratives could form identities and how frames are important to justify a discourse and hence reinforce the purpose of being, Hezbollah has used the constant, existent or non-existent, threat of Israel. The disarmament of the party, stated in the Taef Agreement, has been a core question in Lebanese politics for a long time. However, Hezbollah keeps it weapons and as such, has kept their image and their purpose of being as a resistance movement. Recent

developments in Lebanon, with the crisis of 2008 when Hezbollah took to the streets of Beirut to manifest their power, has showed that the recognition as a resistance movement does not serve the purpose of the party anymore but has rather alienated the party from the other communities in Lebanon (Crisis Group 2008b: 5-6).

The creation of Hezbollah has definitely contributed to the emergence of the Shiite identity. Although a lot of Hezbollah's political agenda stretches out over non-religious aspects, that more important than any association is the evidence that a palpable sense of community and religious commitment now exist which emphasize that a mark of faith is to offer a helping hand to others and to participate in the community (Norton 2007: 111).

4.2 Marginalisation or re-manifestation?

At the time of independence, the Christian community was the strongest political actor on the Lebanese scene. The Christian collective identity had in large been formed around the idea of "Great Lebanon" as a democratic country, separated from Syria, the Arab world and instead open to the west (Picard 2002: 25-26). The Christians and in particular the Maronites, saw themselves as the defenders of Lebanese interests and nationalism and the guarantors of its independence from foreign occupation (Tabar 1994). Tabar goes as far as arguing that that the maintenance of Lebanese entity and its confessional political system was conditional upon the protection of the political dominance of the maronite leadership (ibid). Other communities observe that the Christians believe that Lebanon belongs to them and that democratic values cannot be implemented in a Muslim society and therefore Lebanon has to be a Christian state (Copti 2006, interview Beirut).

As the political confessional system was considered undemocratic, the Christians saw it as their mission to abolish it. During the *Synod* in 1995¹, the Roman-Catholic Prelate stated: "*Political deconfessionalisation will be the ultimate battle for the Christians of Lebanon*" (Dagher 2000: 179-181f). Interesting enough, since independence in 1943, the Christians have had an unjust proportion of power in politics – their parliamentary representation has been greater than their actual population number. Naturally this has put them in a favourable political position. The Christian community would loose political power if the system of today was replaced by one not based on sectarian representation, but on the rule of majority, as a vast part of the Lebanese Muslim community wishes.

At the end of the civil war, coinciding with the emergence of a strong Shiite identity, the Christians lost self-confidence. Through the Taef agreement they lost

¹ A *Synod* is an ecumenic religious meeting

political power to the Muslim community and as a consequence of the Syrian influence, could not even install the President, who is Christian, on their own terms (Crisis Group 2008a: 3-5). While Hezbollah was supported by Syria, the Christian community developed a fierce hostility towards the occupation power, Syria. The Christians blamed Syria for their political marginalisation after the war and so identified the Shiite Muslims and in particular Hezbollah, as “the other”, an ally to Syria.

Further analysing the Syrian influence in the identity making process we look at the Sunni community. Since the end of the civil war, the Sunni community had an ambiguous relationship to Syria where some Sunni leaders in Lebanon formed alliances with the country whereas others rather saw Syria as being the obstacle to sovereignty in the Lebanon. As an example, Rafic Hariri, the much-supported prime minister who was murdered in 2005, enjoyed support from Syria for a long time, but just before he was murdered, took a stance against the politics of Syria in Lebanon (Crisis Group 2010b: 2-5). The Sunni community felt weakened and vulnerable in the wake of the murder of Rafic Hariri; no credible alternative was offered and the Shiite movement had grown bigger and the Sunni, traditionally a strong political power, was shattered and losing power (ibid). Since 2005, the Sunni community has nurtured a sectarian feeling and hostility towards the Shiites. The military and political power of Hezbollah had deepened the feeling of ontological insecurity and as a response to this, the Sunni community re-manifested its political power by standing united behind Saad Hariri, the son of the late Rafic Hariri, when he was elected Prime Minister in June 2009. The Sunni community has argued for an international tribunal to investigate the murder of Hariri, suspecting the involvement of Syria, but the tribunal has been hindered by Hezbollah. For the Sunni community, the Shiites and Syria represents the other in Lebanon today, in relation to which their religious identity has been rearticulated. Hence the sectarian ties were strengthened through the influence of Syria.

Although the identity of Hezbollah as a resistance movement and the withdrawal of Israeli troops from southern Lebanon has favoured its recognition in Lebanon and has gained support in other religious communities, Hezbollah today is more of a threat to the other communities than anything else. The Israeli-Lebanese war in 2006 was more an evidence of the threat that Hezbollah's possession of weapons constitutes, as in the eyes of Israel, it makes Lebanon a legitimate target of intervention (Norton 2007: 152-153), then a proof of a strong legitimate resistance movement. As such, the Shiite movement has lost support and alienated itself from other religious communities in the country. As argued by a UN military observer in southern Lebanon: after the war, the dream about a unified Lebanon has again become only a dream (Norton 2007: 153).

The crisis of 2008, when Hezbollah took to the streets to show their military power in order to win a political dispute most certainly deepened the sectarian divide. The movement took over Sunni dominated neighbourhoods as well as important political institutions connected to the Sunni community, such as the house of the Prime minister, and the Sunni community felt insecure about their own insignificantly military power (Crisis Group 2010b: 12-13).

Has then the Christian community reinforced the confessional climate by favouring Christian interests? The end of the civil war led to a disorganised Christian political movement, whose leaders were either in prison or in exile, as such they needed a new leader and gave space to religious leader to fill that gap. One example that

illustrates this is when, for the parliament elections in 2005, the Christian patriarch Nasrallah Sfeir initiated that the scattered Christian community unite under the political bloc Cornet Shehwan. The Christian community has felt marginalised at the expense of other confessional groups in Lebanon, as well as threatened by the political and military power of these groups, in particular the Shiites. As Syrian nationals and Muslim Palestinians obtained Lebanese citizenship, this implied another threat to the Christian existence (Crisis Group 2008a: 2). They no longer had demographic majority, a factor that could be analysed through ontological insecurity, suggesting that the Christians have felt an existential threat thus turning to religion as the identity signifier.

The Doha agreement from may 2008, that put an end to the political deadlock where Lebanon had been since the mandate of the former President came to a term in 2007 and no consensus candidate was found to replace him. The deadlock was caused by the pull out of ministers in the cabinet by the opposition, dominated by Hezbollah, who had sought greater representation in the cabinet. The Parliamentary majority bloc, the March 14 alliance, led by the Sunni Muslim Prime Minister, refused to give way to this demand, saying it had a clear majority and that giving a veto to the opposition would result. What is interesting with the agreement, in the view of the Christian community, besides that it re-installed the President, is that it paves way for a new electoral law where Christian MPs can be elected without having to form political alliances with its Muslim counterparts (Crisis Group 2008a: 1-2). This would imply that the Christian community would be able to express strictly, non-negotiated Christian political agendas in the Parliament (ibid). Could one then say that the manifestation of the power of the Shiite community, through Hezbollah and the opposition, paved way for an agreement, that gave benefits also for the opposition but that also potentially will increase the possibility of the Christians to opt for a Christian political agenda.

In 2005, part of the Christian political elite formed an alliance with Hezbollah, analysed as a way of obtaining political party, but as today, after 2008, the support for Hezbollah within the Christian community, that already was low, has now diminished (Crisis Group 2010a) and one could argue that if the Christians can avoid an alliance with Hezbollah they would.

5 Conclusion

We argued that identities are constructed in relation to the other, around a narrative and solidified and reproduced through institutions.

In Lebanon, the confessional system as such implies that the political identities are religious, as the political representation is divided along sectarian lines. The confessional system was supposed to be an interim solution and a political deconfessionalisation is previewed in the Lebanese constitution and the Taef Agreement that ended the civil war. I argued that, whether the deconfessionalisation would imply that political processes are transcending confession or that confessionalism is abolished from all levels of society, as long as the Lebanese identify themselves in terms of religion, they will tend to favour the interests of their religious group. We looked at the consociational model, of which Lebanon is an example, and saw that it requires certain prerequisites in order to ensure political stability. Leaders (politician) need to develop overlapping memberships or loyalties and not only, in the Lebanese case, identify themselves as members of a religious community. I further argued that recent developments in Lebanon rather points towards a reconfessionalisation instead of a deconfessionalisation, hence that sectarian division are reinforced.

As argued, the collective identity is a social construction that includes the definition of boundaries and in Lebanon, the boundary seem to be the religion. So when does individuals consider themselves as members of an in-group, in the words of Tajfel? When the similarities between the members in the group becomes more evident and at the same time the difference between the group and other groups becomes more apparent (Petersson et al 2003: 22-23) This would imply that the stronger the sense of an in-group is, the more sectarian the Lebanese society becomes.

The religious communities in Lebanon have formed their identities around exclusiveness. The Christians in the narratives of being the bearer of democracy and the guarantors of political stability in Lebanon, accusing Islam of being undemocratic and hence alienating themselves from the Muslim communities. Membership in Hezbollah demands adherence to the Shiite religion and by that excludes all other religious groups in Lebanon. The institutions around the religious communities, where identities are argued to be reproduced, are not exclusive to the specific religious group but in practice no Christian Lebanese would consult the Islamic court and no other group in Lebanon, apart from the Shiites, would consider a life as a martyr and hence be entitled to receive economical support from Hezbollah and very few Christians would attend an Islamic University.

I would argue then that the creation of a new party, Hezbollah, has meant the emergence of a new strong Shiite identity. Hezbollah was created as a resistance movement, the religious purpose and social-revolutionary ideas being the narrative and the occupation by Israel being the reason for fighting. The Shiite community, structurally marginalised and ontologically insecure, gave rise to a politics of resistance and the growth of local identities, here religion is the local identity (Kinnvall 2004: 747). But it has also reinforced sectarianism in the sense that other religious group, fighting for political survival, has re-manifested their power along sectarian lines. Hezbollah is seen as a threat and represents the other, alone or as an ally to Syria.

Although we try to define identity as something else than primordial, when we add narrative, religion remains as the identity signifier. This is because, even the narratives, as well as the institutions, are constructed around religion. We could then argue, in order to explain why religion remains coherent, that religion is the only identifiable mechanism and as such explain the persistence of religion in the process of identity reproduction. We could also, as discussed previously, by using security as a thick identifier, could draw the conclusion that as people feel increasingly uncertain about their daily life, the search for security takes on ontological and existential dimensions and people search for one stable identity. Kinnvall argues, that in times of insecurity people tend to seek towards the collective identity that more likely than other identity-signifiers provide the feeling of security. Such identities are most likely religious or national identities. Kinnvall gives the example of the threat of a globalised but the threat could also be something else (Kinnvall 2004: 742). The unstable political situation in Lebanon, both internally and through external factors such as Israel and Iran, contributes to the feeling of insecurity of all communities in the country. In addition to that, the different communities feel threats as directly targeted towards them, such as, for the Christian community, the loss of political power and diminishing demographical power. The Sunni Muslim community feels a direct threat of Hezbollah in particular after the manifestation of military power of Hezbollah in 2008. The Shiite community feels the threat from Israel and have justified their continuous possession of weapons by the existing, or non-existing threat from the neighbour. The religious identity becomes the securitizing identity.

Today, Hezbollah has lost a large part of its legitimacy as a resistance movement due to the crisis in 2008 when they took to the streets of Beirut. Their identity as a resistance movement was probably the only characteristic that was non-confessional and now they seem to have lost it. I argue that the Shiite identity will reproduce itself as a religious identity as long as the threat of Israel persists, for real or imagined, and as long as the institutions, related to the religious leaders continuous to provide what the Lebanese Government fails to provide. The Sunni Muslim community have already manifested their political strength and thus enhancing the sectarian division and the Christian community might get the opportunity to do the same if the new electoral law is implemented. The boundaries will become even sharper between the religious groups, unless there is an alternative to the religious identity. As long as there are no alternatives, the religion persists as the only identifiable mechanism in a changing environment and therefore survives as a coherent identity signifier.

So how should then deconfessionalisation be obtained? If the institutional reform outlined in the Taef agreement really is carried out, will that guarantee the political deconfessionalisation? Lijphart argues that the consociational model requires strong leaders that represents the group but also sees to the interest of the country. The problem of deconfessionalisation though, is that confessional forces must carry out the process. How can these confessional forces, struggling over their respective shares within the confessional system, carry out the process of deconfessionalisation? Would the leaders in Lebanon today be brave enough to change a system that plays in their favour? So maybe then deconfessionalisation is not the answer for Lebanon today? Maybe it is as Salam argues, the power-sharing provided by the confessional system has come to offer the only solution to restore civil peace in Lebanon and therefore the country cannot afford to change it (Salam 2004: 75-95).

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