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Confessionalism From Below: Youth Politics and Communal Conflict in Lebanon.

- This paper is a preliminary “take” on my doctoral fieldwork, conducted in Lebanon between December – February 2007 and November 2008 – Jan 2009.

The puzzle:

In February 2005, the deeply divided Lebanon witnessed the largest demonstrations in its history: the Independence Intifada. For 6 weeks between February and March 2005, a million Lebanese took to the streets to demand an end to external interference and a more unified, democratic, independent Lebanon. These demonstrations were largely spear-headed by the country’s youth. It was the so-called “post-war” generation (the largest generation of youth in Lebanese history) that camped out in tents in Beirut’s downtown core, formed human chains kilometers long, created music, brands and slogans calling a unified, democratic and free Lebanese nation.

The Independence Intifada however, presents a puzzle. Many of the hundreds of thousands of young people who cried out for an end to paralyzing religious sectarian divisions were, paradoxically, organized along the same lines that perpetuate them. Lebanese Youth were making their demands for greater democracy, unity while wearing the logos, clad in the colours and waving the flags of their sectarian leaders - the same war-time political elite accused of undermining this national vision. Why?

What does this patchwork of young sectarian activists--paradoxically, calling for a secular state and national unity--tell us?

My research questions:

My doctoral research examines the (re)production of ethno-religious (communal) identities and divisions generation after generation, declining economic conditions, youth and political behaviour.

Specifically I ask:

- 1) Why, when the majority of educated Lebanese youth (survey data say 82%) say they subscribe to Lebanese nationalism, support the abolishment of the sectarian political system, and want a secular democratic state, do they participate in sectarian parties and movements and follow (often an older generation of) sectarian leaders?
- 2) What do youth politics in Lebanon reveal about the dynamics of ethno-religious (communal) movements? Specifically - why do ‘followers’ (particularly young, educated

followers) ‘follow’ sectarian elites and movements and how do the actions of actors “from below” effect communal movements?

- 3) What does the nature of youth politics in Lebanon tell us about the politics of change - or in this case, the politics of persistence – of communal divisions in “developing” societies? What does it teach us about why these movements persist over and above the cross-cutting, democratic “civil society” movements that are also associated with youth (in Lebanon and elsewhere)?

Why youth??

- 1) Numbers. If for no other reason – their sheer numbers. This is the largest youth generation in Middle East – and many other developing countries are facing the same “bulge” in their population pyramids. Sixty-five percent of the total population of the Arab region is under the age of 25. At the same time there have been gains in higher education, thus more young people are graduating with university degrees than ever before. Urbanization is also on the rise. By 2015 70% of Arabs are expected to be living in cities (up from 25% in the 1960’s, 57% in 2000).
- 2) So, we have the largest, most educated, urbanized youth generation in the history of the Middle East (this also applies to Lebanon specifically). Yet, we know little about this group as a generation or about the politics of this generation.
- 3) *In literature on youth in developing areas and specifically in the Middle East there is an assumption that the ‘youth wave’ will have drastic political consequences – more specifically, because of declining economic conditions and resulting unemployment, these youth will turn towards radicalism – and particularly religious radicalism.*
- 4) *Youth, once portrayed as the greatest hope for the nation-state are now portrayed as the greatest threat to it. They are seen as constituting the pool of angry, unemployed, young men that become the recruits for religious radicals.*
- 5) *These assumptions, however:*
 - a. *over simplify the process that connects grievances to political mobilization,*
 - b. *neglect the diversity and contingency of youth politics and*
 - c. *neglect the power of institutions and state-society relations in structuring political outcomes.*

6) *Thus, understanding why youth are making the choices they do, and the complex and contingent political and economic contexts in which those choices are made, the potential political outcomes of those choices is important.*

Why is it important to study youth if we want to understand ethnic movements?

- Besides numbers though, we know from studies of religious and ethnic movements that youth are key players in ethnic movements. Youth are frequently mentioned in the ethnicity literature as the most militant, as the “radical recruits” of ethnic elites (Villalon 1999), the “foot soldiers” of ethnic movements (Robinson 2004); the “blindly followers” older political elites (Bayoumi 2005). And yet this key group of followers are rarely taken up as an object of study – they remain virtually unstudied in this literature as “youth” – as a category unto themselves.
- If and when they are mentioned in the literature, they are discussed in primarily one way: as “angry, desperate, young men” (Tiemessen 2005) or “young, ill-educated, underemployed men from small towns”
- For one, educated, middle class youth follow as well, and they are active in a broad range of ethnic politics and political activity beyond incidents of violent contestation.
- Thus - even if these descriptions are not always inaccurate, (indeed, underemployed youth can be found in ethnic movements), as explanations, they are incomplete and unsatisfying when it comes to understanding why young followers follow ethnic elites.
- Understanding youth (some of the key followers) also help us to understand followers and following more generally - which in scholarship on ethnicity, there remains much room for exploration, both theoretically and empirically, as to why the “flocks” continue to “buy into” ethnic categories that perpetuate conflict.
- Indeed, part of what I want to investigate here is whether “following” is even an accurate description of what the youth (if not “followers” more broadly) of ethnic movements are actually ‘doing’.
- Indeed and Fearon and Laitin argue, current explanations be them more instrumentalist or constructivist are unsatisfying when it comes to examining followers, whether they be instrumentalist or constructivist explanations, “the most common narrative” in the literature when explaining ethnic conflict is that it is “provoked by elites seeking to gain, maintain, or increase their hold on political power” (Fearon and Laitin 2000, 846). Ordinary folk are too frequently reduced to “instruments of someone’s history... a history recorded in the “language of plots, as if events were beyond people’s control” (Makdisi

2000, 170). Elites are treated as the evil politicians, and the followers as innocent, naïve masses.

- In an attempt to fill this gap James Fearon and David Laitin (2000) reviewed major works on ethnic conflicts (Brass 1997; Deng 1995; Kapferer 1988; McGarry and O’Leary 1995; Prunier 1995; and Woodward 1995) and, among other things, suggested that the masses may participate in ethnic conflicts for reasons that are not directly related to ethnic antipathy, but because they are “pursuing their own local or personal agendas” (2000, 846).
- In other words, the so-called “followers” may not just be following elites, but in fact, pursuing their own interests. Indeed, the works suggest that much of what is referred to as “communal violence” may in fact, be “disputes on the ground that have nothing to do with communal motivations” (Fearon and Laitin 2000, 856). To put it differently, ethnic violence becomes the “cover” for other agendas such as looting, land grabs, personal vengeance, gang violence, neighbourhood disputes, etc.
- In fact, “thugs” (who they describe as young men who are ill educated, unemployed or underemployed, and from small towns who can be easily mobilized by nationalist ideologues, who themselves, university educated, would shy away from killing their neighbours with machetes”) use the opportunity provided by ethnic conflict into order to pursue their interests and this, in turn, results in the perpetuation of ethnic conflict and the (re)creation of ethnic categories and conflict (874).
- This contribution by Fearon and Laitin is the one that most closely relates to my own argument about youth in Lebanon. My work builds on and branches off from theirs, however, in key ways.
 - a. Similarly I argue that followers are not simply just following, but also making use of ethnic resources networks and identity for their own purposes – and not necessarily for the purpose of advancing communal agendas.
 - b. However, I examine broader contexts of ethnic contestation and politics that may include but are not limited to violent conflict.
 - c. My work deepens their implicit focus on the links between youth, class, and education. In that I examine urban educated youth who are mobilized into ethnic movements.
- So, what does my preliminary work suggest about why youth follow (why youth participate in sectarian movements?).

- My argument has four main points:
 - Instrumental (material purposes),
 - instrumental (political purposes),
 - this agency means autonomy under certain conditions,
 - but in the end structures are too strong and they rejuvenate but not transform –
 - more so, it is the relative autonomy youth have within these movements That allows the movements to evolve and persist generation over generation.

- First, I argue that just as elites instrumentally use ethnic “resources” for their material and political agendas, so do youth – so do youth. Instrumentalism, in short, is not only top down, nor uni-directional – it is a two-way street. Youth are also instrumentalists from below. And youth have both *material* and *political* agendas.

- Just on the material point first - youth engage in sectarian movements, join sectarian parties, and participate in sectarian demonstrations for the purposes of creating and accessing opportunities to shape their lives and futures in a society where economic conditions have declines (indeed this generation has witnessed their families decline from the middle class to lower class – went from 60% to 20% in the post-war era) and opportunities for advancement is extremely limited. Thus they use these networks to access opportunities for employment, securing positions in student government, adding qualifications to their CV’s (student quotes), gaining entry to peer groups, building social capital, obtain protection and security (jail example), even for socializing (dating is a big draw).

- Moreover, they use sectarian resources regardless of whether or not their political attitudes, ideas or opinions are strongly sectarian in nature.¹ Thus, contrary to what the literature suggests, youth are not simply the passive objects, or blind followers of elite manipulation.

- Rather, my preliminary research suggests that youth are active participants who make rational and contingent choices to participate in sectarian movements to protect or advance their class position and / or material interests.

¹ My preliminary research demonstrates youths’ decisions to participate are based on clear, purposeful and instrumental choices. In discussions, youth who were running in student elections would report (while clad in sectarian symbols, colours, and flags): “I do not really believe in Sectarianism. I don’t even consider myself a sectarian person. I think Lebanon would be better off without it. But if you want to get in (i.e.: to student government) and a lot of us do because it is good for your CV, you have to go with a (sectarian) party... you get support from them, and your chances of winning are way better”. This argument also explains why youth will often make different political choices than their siblings and/or parents, albeit still most often within the same sectarian community). Because, certain parties offer access to different types of networks and different types of opportunities, young people will chose to join those that they feel will best assist them in advancing their own interests.

- Why do I argue there is agency here?
 - Youth talk about their political affiliations in these ways - extremely deliberately – very rationally (CV's, jobs, get out of jail free card).
 - My research shows that contrary to what you would expect, youth in sectarian parties are choosing parties that do not reflect their family's political traditions or affiliations. Surprisingly many of the youth I spoke to were the only of their families to be involved in a given movement. Youth would often speak of conflict with siblings (brothers) over conflicting choices of sectarian party. Although choices usually still ran along sectarian lines (cross sect choices occurred but were not the norm) – there is still some limited range of choice being made here.

- This is not to deny that youth are not manipulated or used by ethnic elites nor is it to argue that their participation is not also shaped by the strength of the state-society structures (both formal and informal). Rather, my argument is that within the institutions and structures that shape this ethnically divided society – there is still agency. Youth have agency in whether and how to participate in sectarian politics.

- The second piece of the argument is that youth also use sectarian networks and movements for political purposes - purposes that can be independent of their leaders' agendas. Ironically, the research suggests that Lebanese youth are seeking to exercise and claim their Lebanese identity and citizenship - and have a voice (if not power) in the political fray. But, paradoxically - youth are using sectarian platforms to make their claims and voice their demands for the nation they “long for” (Salem 2008). Youth politics if not youth themselves, is one that is “caught” between their Lebanese national citizenship and their sectarian membership.

- This sheds light on why, the 2005 Lebanese Independence Intifada was (at times) a contradictory display of youth wearing T-shirts with the faces of sectarian leaders, waving Lebanese flags, and for an end to sectarianism.

- Although some scholars have described this contradictory display as the result of young people being the naïve objects of manipulation by the sectarian elite. My own research suggests otherwise - that the participation of youth as sectarian activists in this and other post-war political events is not a product of top-down processes of mobilization. In fact, as I will explain, sectarian elites were slow to respond, if not completely absent from the first weeks of these historical protests. The energy, work, and creativity of youth in the weeks of massive protests were on their own initiative. Elites stepped in to support them, and indeed lay claim to their mobilization, only after the fact.

- The third fold of my argument is that because of the agency - indeed instrumentalism - in youth's participation in sectarian movements, youth have achieved some degree of autonomy from sectarian leaders, if not even directed ethnic movements towards in particular political directions – albeit under certain political conditions and for temporary periods.
- The relationship between elites and followers – in this case sectarian leaders and their youth members – is more elastic than is often discussed in the literature.
- The efforts of youth during the 2005 Independence Intifada are a case in point – it is to this example I now turn.
- Beginning in 1997, there are key examples from the post-war era of youth in sectarian movements who initiated protests against the curtailing of freedoms and civil liberties that took place under Syrian occupation. They did this in cooperation with secular youth activists and independent of direction from sectarian elites (I won't go into the details here).
- Youth, took advantage of events such as visits of religious clerics to cross red lines with regards to the Syrian occupation, take political risks and stage demonstrations. They first began to break the taboos of speaking out against Syria in advance of the political elites. Sectarian youth were also more broad based in their collaboration – they cooperated more with each other (Mainly Christian, Druze, and Leftists but some Sunni youth – although they joined later) as the post-war period wore on and with critical turning points such as the Israeli withdrawal from the south in 2000 which opened the door for more open opposition to Syrian occupation.
- These waves of activism by sectarian youth established the roots for the bursting forth of activism after Hariri's assassination in 2005 and in this sense, their activities were the precursor to the Independence Intifada.
- Their activism was independent but paralleled at times, at the top at times by some parallel alliance building among the sectarian elites.
- These activities laid the ground work for the massive demonstrations that took place in 2005 –after the assassination of Hariri when youth (momentarily) re-found themselves at the heart of Lebanese politics.
- Youth were not the “only masters of the game” but they played a key leadership role in the 70 days of protests.

1. They independently initiated these demonstrations – including the camp in the downtown core that lasted nearly 70 days. This camp ended up being funded (food and water, by both NGOs and sectarian parties).
2. They injected the protests with creativity, devising innovative ways of mobilizing the population: sending SMS messages, thinking up slogans like “the Ukraine did it, can we” (p. 22) and, “If you want the truth dial 1559” (p. 31); Christian youth would carry Qurans, Muslim youth carried bibles, (p. 38);
3. They also created new brands, and rap music that promoted the idea of Lebanon and a Lebanese nation free from sectarian conflict.
4. Youth brought joy and fun to the demonstrations that captured the country’s attention and encouraged others to participate.
5. Youth also initiated the first of the weekly Monday demonstrations that culminated in those of March 14th, 2005; the first turnout was “massive” and it surprised both youth and political leaders (p. 27).
6. This series of protests can be credited for the first victory of the emerging youth movement on Feb 28th

- During these days youth had a degree of liberty and autonomy vis a vis their own leaders.
- Indeed it was after these efforts and the increasingly audacity of youth (holding up pictures of the security chiefs whose resignation they were calling for) that the sectarian leaders started to become more involved. One scholars argues that the youth, in a way, helped to lead the politicians to their constituencies - back to their role as representatives of the people.
- It is an example of the autonomy of youth politics – even though these are youth who are out there as members of sectarian movements – these are the foot soldiers of the ethnic elites in Lebanon – and yet they are having an impact on the direction of politics.
- There is elasticity between these youth and the elites and the sectarian movements.
- But – Were youth and the other civil society actors around them enough to take Lebanon and the Lebanese elites into their own direction? If I am arguing that youth are not simply objects – how far does their agency and autonomy extend? And what is the political significance of this in the end?

Many youth felt that they were entering a new era

- In the end – because of the shape and strength of the structures of state-society youth - even a generation as large as this one – are not a strong or unified enough force to create

space free from the restrictions of Lebanon's sectarian society where the secular agenda (that many say they want) would be able to take form.

- Rather, the sectarian elastic snapped back:
 1. The leaders stepped in, laid claim to youth initiatives, rallied their flocks.
 2. The parliamentary elections that were held that spring also gave an opportunity for the leadership of the various parties and communities to reassert their central positions within their sectarian communities. The wave created during the II was no comparison to the force of elections.
 3. There was also the return of assassinations - car bombings that reenergized "the old confessional fears" (p. 50); this also indicated that *the emerging geo-strategic politicking had surpassed the capacity of students to in response*
- Youth then were "reabsorbed back into sectarian movements" and the youth who had enjoyed a certain degree of freedom during the days leading up to the II lost it in the aftermath.
- Thus, the final fold (crux) of my argument, is that youth (even the largest youth generation in Lebanese history) are not a sufficiently strong or unified constituency to *transform* sectarian dynamics. Rather, the energy, creativity, and ideas that youth devote to creating opportunities for a more secure material and political future end up *rejuvenating* the movements and divisions that put these very things at risk.
- To take it one step further, what I might also suggest here is that – precisely because the fact that youth (i.e.: followers) have some degree of agency and autonomy in these movements, is precisely WHY these movements are able to adapt, (re)construct themselves and persist as effectively as they do. Their limited flexibility, the limited range of freedom followers have, allows them to contribute to breathing new life into old movements – it was the students who led the leaders to the people...for example, and who made the movements techno savvy, with new brands, music and feel – the paradox is because youth are using these networks for these purposes, and because of the strongly path dependent nature of a deeply divided and developing countries like Lebanon, youthful resources, rejuvenates but does not transform.

- 7) A similar logic to the selective liberalization of semi-authoritarian regimes (they selectively liberalise political rights and freedoms, but only insofar as it does not threaten the existence of the regime). Of course, I do not believe that elite are this deliberate or this smart (frankly – at least not these ones!) but – I am suggesting that it is very flexibility of movements, and the elasticity of the relationship between followers and elites, may in fact be what allows them to appeal and persist generation after generation.
- 8) Emergent Nationalism –“*Which Lebanon? My Lebanon!*”
Here’s a concluding irony – is that the post-war era, when sectarianism has only deepened – in the words of samir Khalaf “much more invasive”, intruding “virtually every national discourse and public issue”, and sparking “confessional hostility and anxiety”. – it is in this sectarian landscape that Lebanese nationalism has begun emerged – granted it is only skin deep, but it has still emerged.

As Theodore Hanf calls it – Like it or not, the Lebanese have become a nation – albeit a skeptical one.

Kamal Jumblatt (Druze leader) said this about the Lebanese in 1976:

“This society is not a society in the real sense of the word because there is no such thing as a Lebanese community. There is no Lebanese social unit. Lebanon is a collection of sects and socio-religious communities. Thus, it is not a society no a community, now a nation. That is why the state in which the society reflects itself is very weak, so weak that it might collapse at any moment... There is no such thing as Lebanese Nationalism.”

This is not the case today. Indeed, scholars of Lebanon (Khalaf, Hanf, Faour) have suggested (and their survey data demonstrates) that what Lebanon has become in fact become in the post-war era is in fact a nation – albeit a “sceptical” one (Hanf 2002, 219). The fact this has even emerged given the deepening of sectarian cleavages in interesting – and furthermore, it is also reflected in Youth politics – and the fact that 87% of youth now say that they subscribe to Lebanese Nationalism (as opposed to pre-war surveys that indicate....

The student elections at AUB provides an illustrative anecdote. As the votes were being tallied under high security, thousands of students gathered in front of the main hall of the university. They students were physically divided into the two rival political coalitions of

Lebanon: The March 8 group (Shi'a and some Maronite Christians) and the March 14th group (Maronite, Sunni and Druze). At one point the March 8 group shouted at the March 14th group, calling them "Zionists" – the ultimate insult, and a jab at their political alignment with the west. The March 14th side, in response, begins to sing the Lebanese national anthem. "They are asserting their Lebanese identity" a reporter explains. In response to this, what does the March 8 side do? They begin singing the Lebanese National anthem – only louder. What transpires is, in effect, a national anthem "sing-off" between these young Lebanese, deeply divided in two opposing camps, each side competing to "out Lebanon" their rivals; each side with competing answers to the question: "Which Lebanon will prevail?"

- Survey data from the last decade show among the post-war generation in Lebanon 82% of educated youth thought Lebanon should become a secular state – i.e.: that religious identity should not play a role in public / political appointments.
- 90% of Christians and 79% of Muslim youth surveyed expressed willingness to "act in order to remedy the (political) situation"
- And 81% said they subscribed Lebanese Nationalism and not to Islamic, Syrian or Arab Nationalism.

And yet, of the educated youth who become politically engaged, the majority follow a particular sectarian leader and participate in a particular sectarian movement or party. Why?