

# Consociationalism in Lebanon after the Cedar Revolution: External Threats, Political Instability, and Macrosecuritizations

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## ABSTRACT

The literature on consociationalism posits external threats increase elite cooperation and political stability in consociational systems, provided that the threat is perceived as common by all political segments. Lebanon—a prominent consociational case—invites further reflection on this proposition, as international crises and even war did not increase cooperation between political parties. To further explore the relationship between external threats and political stability, the paper proposes a critical security approach, based on the Copenhagen School of security. The study investigates how political elites construct foreign threats relying on media analysis complemented by personal elite and expert interviews, as well as secondary sources. The study finds that despite political elites' commitment to system maintenance, external threats decrease political stability in Lebanon because political segments are part of competing macrosecuritizations.

## Introduction

Consociationalism has spawned a vast literature in comparative politics and has achieved tangible results in practice. If external actors were not central to early power-sharing theory, more recent scholarly work has given them increasing weight, especially in post-conflict consociations. Lebanon, a crucial case for the consociational model, has highlighted the importance of external actors throughout its history; but the relationship between external dangers and internal political stability deserves more attention, with Lijphart confirming early on that in Lebanon external threats constitute a lasting negative condition for political stability.<sup>1</sup> Why are they a lasting negative condition for stability? As the construction of security is increasingly transcending state borders worldwide, a careful analysis of Lebanon provides insights that can contribute to fine tuning consociationalism for the dynamics of conflict resolution and security.

The Copenhagen School of security offers an appropriate framework for reassessing the relationship between external threats and political stability: it provides a nuanced understanding of threat, as reflected by human perception; it goes beyond traditional approaches to security used in most studies of consociationalism, which take the state as an implicit referent object of security; it widens the concept of security to include

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sectors other than the military; and gives equal importance to transborder and multi-level security.<sup>2</sup>

This article focuses on political instability fueled by political elites between 2005 and 2019 and aims to understand how their perceptions of external threats impacted political stability. Following the Copenhagen School, the paper focuses on three guiding questions: (1) Do political elites have a common referent object of security (the state of Lebanon)? (2) Do political elites agree on what constitutes a threat to the referent object? (3) Do they agree on how to respond to external threats? Two *external threats* dominate public discourse—the *threat of Syria* and *the threat of Israel*; political elites are treated as proxies for the political parties they are members of.

The study of elite perceptions of threats concentrates on their discourse, which offers a window into how elites construct security threats. The study relies on media analysis focused on political elites' public statements, complemented by personal elite and expert interviews. Political stability is studied based on analysis of primary and secondary sources, complemented by expert interviews and stability indicators.

The article begins by contextualizing the literature on consociationalism and previous analyses of Lebanese consociation; it then discusses concepts borrowed from the Copenhagen School, the unit of analysis—political parties—and the research methods. It discusses political instability in Lebanon between 2005 and 2019, focusing on the role of political elites, and addresses each of the three guiding questions. The paper concludes with a discussion of the relevance of the findings for the implementation of consociational agreements. In Lebanon political elites have a durable cross-cutting identity and do not contest the legitimacy of the state; however, foreign threats increase political instability because political elites are integrated into higher levels of security dynamics, which produce effects on domestic political alliances.

## Literature review

Among Lijphart's factors conducive to cooperation among political elites is "the existence of foreign threats to the country—in all consociational democracies, the cartel of elites was either initiated or greatly strengthened during periods of international crisis."<sup>3</sup> For Lijphart political elites are a key element of stability in plural societies, because their behavior and their socialization becomes habitual and can acquire a strong degree of persistence throughout time. He clarified in his later work that foreign threats "must be perceived as a common danger by all segments to have a unifying effect,"<sup>4</sup> and signaled that "only for the cases of Cyprus and Lebanon does the international situation constitute a lasting negative condition."<sup>5</sup>

External actors were not central to early power-sharing theory. However more recent literature has given them increasing weight, especially in post-conflict consociational configurations. As Horowitz explains, in the aftermath of conflicts, consociational agreements aim to end violence and as they become cemented, their durability is doubtful in the absence of strong favorable external forces.<sup>6</sup> McGarry and O'Leary criticize conventional consociational theory for downplaying the importance of outside factors.<sup>7</sup> Conventional theories "treat political systems as closed entities, leading to a focus on endogenous factors when explaining conflict, and a stress on internal institutions,

modelled on the traditional ‘Westphalian’ state.’<sup>8</sup> McGarry proposes four variables that affect variation in consociationalism’s performance (beyond Lijphart’s), among them the role played by external actors in the making and implementation of consociational agreements, and the way in which security is structured and managed.<sup>9</sup>

The literature that addresses the role of external actors in post-conflict consociations is divided on whether they play a positive or negative role. Walsh and Doyle argue that international actors can play positive roles during the implementation of consociational arrangements, for example, in Northern Ireland.<sup>10</sup> Kerr argues that the imposition of consociational agreements as by external actors makes such exercises unsustainable.<sup>11</sup> McCulloch and McEvoy focus on the motivations of external actors and their impact on the power-sharing system, identifying a tradeoff between crisis management and long-term objectives.<sup>12</sup> McEvoy assesses the effectiveness of external incentives, concluding that “power sharing is formed and maintained when external actors’ rewards for compliance meet internal actors’ minimum constitutional preferences in the post-conflict environment.”<sup>13</sup>

Many studies of Lebanese consociation analyze the impact of external actors on the implementation of the consociational agreement. Dekmejian distinguishes three competing levels and symbols of allegiance: the subnational, national, and supranational levels.<sup>14</sup> Others distinguish between internal and external factors conducive to political stability and show, in line with Horowitz’s criticism, that effective implementation “depends on outsiders—Syria, Israel, Iran, Saudi Arabia and the US,” as Lebanese elites are caught up in the game of “patching up” Lebanese democracy.<sup>15</sup> Geukjian argues that “the success and failure of conflict regulation through consociation in Lebanon depends on the maintenance of positive exogenous pressures.”<sup>16</sup> External factors may play a more positive role than envisaged in Lijphart’s work, yet heavy-handed interventions like the case of post-Taif Syria are counterproductive.<sup>17</sup> Some authors address specifically how external threats impact elite cooperation and political stability. Zahar gives more weight to political elites’ agency and emphasizes the lasting impact of foreign intervention, which is “largely a function of Lebanese factions seeking to gain advantage over each-other,” as they “frame their domestic opponents in terms of international struggles.”<sup>18</sup> Consequently, Zahar argues that peace has been historically dependent on foreign actors.<sup>19</sup> Kerr similarly argues that the Lebanese power arrangement is flawed because of the negative impact of external actors’ rivalry.<sup>20</sup>

While these studies provide valuable insights into the role of external actors, they give little attention to the catalyzing role of political elites, and if they do, they do not adopt constructivist approaches, taking for granted political elites’ perceptions of external actors. Nagle’s study of how ethnic identities are constructed by political elites in Lebanon adopts such an approach, however without addressing the role of external actors. Nagle underlines that understanding elite discourses may aid programs designed by policymakers and improve our understanding of the appropriateness of consociationalism as a form of conflict management.<sup>21</sup> In Horowitz’s terms, Nagle puts durable conflict resolution on consociationalism’s agenda, but without focusing on the role of external threats.

This article focuses on how the construction of security by political elites in relation to external actors impacts political stability in Lebanon. The analytical framework is

based on the Copenhagen School, and echoes integrationist approaches to consociationalism by assuming cross-cutting identities can be constructed; and linkage theory, by prioritizing the role of external threats as determinants of political stability.

### The Copenhagen School and consociationalism

The Copenhagen School and its securitization theory is fit to aid consociationalism because it proposes an alternative to state-centered security approaches, which, like the conventional consociationalism literature, “treat the state as a sovereign, independent and insulated entity.”<sup>22</sup> Both theories emphasize the importance of political leadership and identity, and focus on the middle level: in consociationalism literature, “consociational democracy means government by elite cartel designated to turn a democracy with a fragmented political culture into a stable democracy.”<sup>23</sup> For the Copenhagen School, security depends on political leaders’ speech acts, which have securitizing power—political elites are those who make claims about identity and security, and by doing so they can claim, legitimize, and use any means to safeguard the object of security.<sup>24</sup>

The Copenhagen School can bridge security across levels—from subnational to international. For the case of Lebanon, political elites act in relation to multiple levels which transcend state borders and national alliances; the Copenhagen School provides an alternative for getting “an analytical grip of what happens above the middle level,” introducing the concepts of *macrosecuritization* and *security constellation*.<sup>25</sup> A macrosecuritization is a concept that packs together multiple securitizations, which often claim universality, such as the international world order. Macrosecritizations can bundle together lower-level securitizations, such as international law violations, or challenges to statehood and self-determination. In other words, they give a higher system of meanings that requires some level of alignment from systems at lower levels. Competing macrosecuritizations compose a *security constellation*.

The Copenhagen School redefines the referent object of security—that is the entity that is threatened, or what constitutes the term “we.” It moves beyond the nation or the state in defining identity. The relationship between identity and security is more closely intertwined: the “we” that is under threat can be situated below the state, within society, it is intersubjectively constructed and sticky. Societal security entails the ability to secure and perpetuate the group identified as “we,” or in Buzan and Weaver’s words, “the ability of a society to persist in its essential character under changing conditions, and possible or actual threat.”<sup>26</sup> This approach “opened up for the study of ‘identity security,’ focusing especially on cases where state and societies do not align” for example, when a minority group is threatened by its state, or when political actors mobilize actors across borders to confront cross border threats.<sup>27</sup> This has relevance for post-civil war consociationalism, where subnational actors contest and construct security during a civil conflict and beyond it, and struggle to negotiate a common identity for the groups engaged in conflict.

The Copenhagen School offers a nuanced approach to *threats*, by positing that security is discursive—it is not an objective phenomenon, but entails the process of presenting an issue in security terms: securitization is a speech act that moves an issue from

the realm of normal politics into the realm of “extraordinary”—“by labelling [an issue] as security, an agent claims a need for and a right to treat it by extraordinary means.”<sup>28</sup> However, the theory’s applicability is limited in contexts where—such as in Lebanon—the exceptionalism of securitization is normalized. The paper tackles this by adopting a more practical alternative proposed by the Paris School of Security, which entails that securitization is not a unitary speech act that renders an issue as exceptional, but rather “the result of a continuum of threats and general unease in which many different actors exchange their fears and beliefs in the process of making a risky and dangerous society.”<sup>29</sup> Hence, the paper does not focus on the exceptional nature of the speech acts, but rather on how political elites construct meanings through speech in a continuum.

### **The securitizing actors: political parties in Lebanon**

While political elites play a key role in identity politics both in consociationalism and securitization theories, their roles are linked to their collectivities. As Buzan et al argue, “if actors are locked into strong roles, it is more relevant to see them as the ‘speaker’ of the collectivities for which individuals are designated authoritative representatives, such as parties, states”<sup>30</sup> or in Lebanon, sects. Thus, the paper focuses on political elites as securitizing actors that act on behalf of a group.

The most intuitive approach in the case of Lebanon is to argue that securitization occurs at sect-level: “ethnicity matters—for violence, democratic stability, institutional design, economic growth, individual well-being, and so on.”<sup>31</sup> While the paper does not question the importance of sect-based identity, prior studies have shown that differences in Lebanese attitudes and value orientations do not fall on religious lines.<sup>32</sup> The political landscape after 2005, largely divided between the two political coalitions—March 8 and March 14, witnessed political parties representing the same sect opposing each other. The Christian parties were divided, with Kataeb and the Lebanese Forces joining the March 14 coalition, and Michel Aoun’s Free Patriotic Movement and Sleiman Frangieh Jr’s Marada Movement joining the opposing March 8 bloc. In the early years after the end of the Syrian occupation, the small Armenian parties were also split between the two alliances, with the Social Democrat Hunchakian Party and the Armenian Democratic Liberal Party siding with March 14, whereas the Tashnag Armenian Revolutionary Federation joined March 8. The Druze Progressive Socialist Party joined March 14 but showed flexibility by dropping out of the alliance in 2009 and joining March 8; the other small party representing the Druze sect—Talal Arslan’s Lebanese Democratic Party, has proven consistently supportive of the March 8 alliance, regardless of its rival PSP’s position. The only seemingly consistent sectarian cleavage is the Sunni-Shia divide, which put in opposition the Freedom Movement part of the March 14 alliance and representative of the Sunni sect, and the Hezbollah-Amal coalition, representative for the Shia sect, and part of the March 8 alliance. Yet, the Sunni-Shia divide goes beyond sectarianism, and is shaped by regional politics. Moaddel et. all show that “sectarianism was strengthened when different sections of Lebanese society opted to ally with a foreign power, as the Shiites allied with Iran and Syria and the Sunnis with Saudi Arabia.”<sup>33</sup>

The sectarian diversity within the two blocs indicates that Lebanese parties are the relevant units of analysis here. They are the backbone of political processes, and at the forefront of security. As they transitioned from and to armed militias throughout their existence, Lebanese parties and their leadership engage in securitizing discourse regardless of their sect, consolidating their grip of power within or beyond their ethnic group.

## Research design and methods

The study covers ten political parties, including parties that earned 3 or more parliamentary seats and ran candidates in more than one electoral district in the 2018 legislative elections (Table 1), and investigates how elites spoke about Syria and Israel between 2005 and 2019. Although parties are historically embedded in regional and international politics, the paper analyzes post 2005-Lebanon because the Syrian occupation interfered with political elites' freedom of speech and participation in politics. Two external actors—Syria and Israel—are the most recurrent external threats invoked in Lebanese politics.

The paper focuses on party leaders' discourses, following three guiding questions: (1) Do political elites hold the State of Lebanon as the referent object of security? (2) Do political elites agree on what constitutes a threat to the referent object? (3) Do political elites agree on how to respond to external threats? It relies on public statements made by political leaders, and elite and expert interviews. For the big political parties (holding more than 9 parliamentary seats), a minimum of one speech act per political party per year was analyzed, for the periods between 2005 to 2009, and 2014 to 2019.<sup>34</sup> The two time-intervals, tumultuous in terms of discourse and context, were chosen to narrow down the exercise. Three semi-structured interviews with members or supporters of the big political parties were also conducted by the author, where the public statements required further clarifications. Regarding the small political parties included in the research, the analysis relied primarily on semi-structured interviews conducted by the author with a senior-member or a former senior member of the party—four such interviews were conducted by the author, one for each party. At least one relevant public statement by the leading figure of each small party was analyzed.

The public statements made by political elites were selected based on purposive sampling, seeking excerpts of interviews, speeches, or any kind of public statements in which prominent members of the party spoke about Syria and Israel. When collecting the data, sit-down press interviews and speeches were prioritized; where such sources were unavailable, short statements and television appearances, or party documents were also used. The analysis focused only on the segments in which the elites spoke about Syria and Israel. The 130 collected excerpts were indexed in a database in English. The sources include both video recordings (46%) and texts (54%), in English (54%), Arabic (43%), and other languages (French and Russian 3%).

In total, 11 interviews were conducted: four expert interviews, and seven elite interviews. All interviewees responded to the same set of questions. Eight interviews were conducted by the author after the 2018 elections in Beirut, and three remotely (through

**Table 1.** Political parties in Lebanon by number of seats after 2018 elections.

Name of political party (bold: included in the research)	Sect	Nr. of seats <sup>a</sup>	Party leaders included in the study media analysis and <i>personal interviews (italics)</i>
<b>Free Patriotic Movement (FPM)</b>	Christian	23	Michele Aoun, Former Party President Gebran Basil, Party President
<b>Future Movement</b>	Sunni Muslim	20	Saad Hariri, Party President, Fouad Siniora, Former Party President, Ahamad Hariri, MP, Raya Al- Hassan, MP
<b>AMAL</b>	Shia Muslim	16	Nabih Berri, Party President Hussein al-Khalil, MP
<b>Lebanese Forces (LF)</b>	Christian	15	Samir Geagea, Party President <i>Elsy Oueiss, International Secretary</i>
<b>Hezbollah</b>	Shia Muslim	13	Hassan Nasrallah, Secretary General Naim Qassem, Deputy Secretary General <i>Anonymous party activist/supporter</i>
<b>Progressive Socialist Party (PSP)</b>	Druze	9	Walid Jumblatt, Party President <i>Anonymous Senior Member</i>
<b>Armenian Revolutionary Federation in Lebanon (Tashnag)</b>	Armenian Orthodox	3	Hagop Pakradounian, Party President <i>Anonymous Senior Member</i>
<b>Kataeb</b>	Christian	3	Samy Gemayel, Party President <i>Marwan Abdallah, International Secretary</i>
<b>Marada Movement</b>	Christian	3	Sleiman Frangieh, Party President <i>Rebecca El-Hosry, International Secretary</i>
<b>Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP)</b>	N/A	3	Assaad Hardan, Party President <i>Anonymous Former Senior Member</i>
Azem Movement	–	2	–
Ba'ath Party	–	1	–
Lebanese Democratic Party	–	1	–
Sabaa	–	1	–
Ahbash	–	1	–
Nasserist Party	–	1	–
National Dialogue Party	–	1	–
Arab Liberation Party	–	1	–
Independents	–	11	–

<sup>a</sup>Nr. of seats based on Lebanon 2018 Parliamentary Elections Final Report, National Democratic Institute, 2019.

video calls) in 2021. Some requested that their identity would not be disclosed: they are identified as “anonymous.”

## Political elites and instability

Since 2005 Lebanon featured a consistent decrease in political stability and absence of violence, rule of law, and governance effectiveness according to the World Bank Governance Indicators (Figure 1). With lengthy cabinet negotiations, inter-party violence, and widespread protests, chronic political instability has political elites at the forefront. Broadly defined as “the regular flow of political exchanges,”<sup>35</sup> political stability remains an elusive concept in political science;<sup>36</sup> in this paper it is characterized as the absence of violence and civil society systemic protests, governmental longevity and absence of political crises, decision-making effectiveness, and lack of structural change or contestations of the constitutional order.<sup>37</sup>

The incidence of organized violence and terrorist attacks increased after 2005, reaching peaks in the number of violent incidents in 2006, 2008, and 2014 (Figure 2).

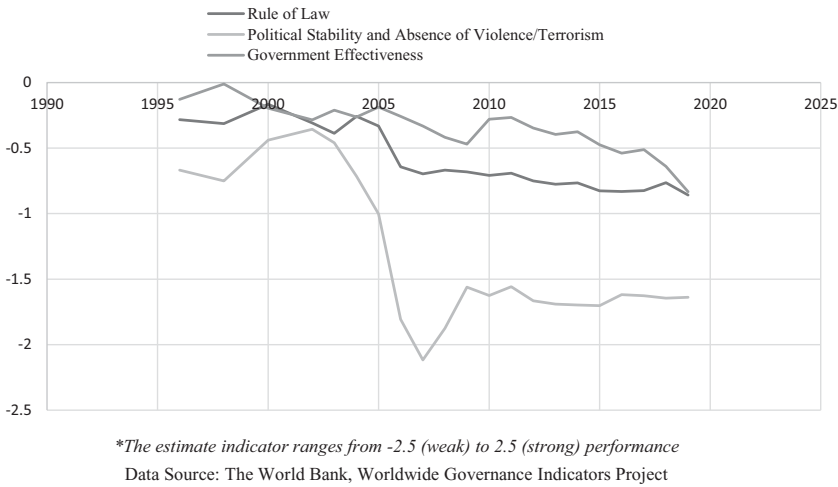


Figure 1. Worldwide governance indicators Lebanon (selection), 1996–2019.

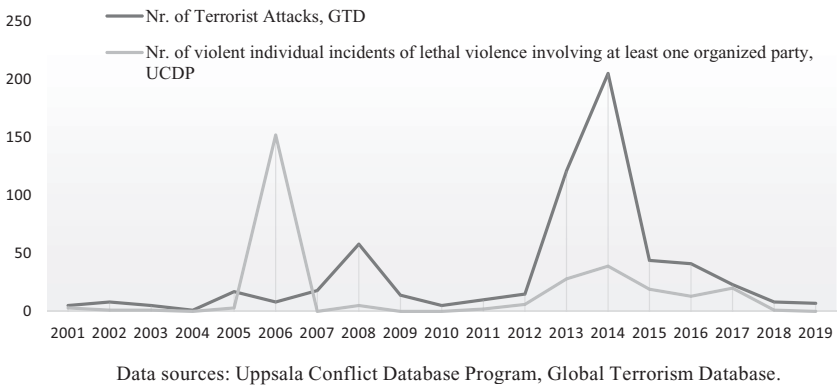


Figure 2. Nr. of violent incidents in Lebanon, 2001–19.

Political elites themselves were subjects of and involved in violent irregularities, which “modified the system of political exchanges and altered the regular pattern of political exchange.”<sup>38</sup> Conflict between the leadership of Hezbollah and PSP precipitated the May 2008 violence. Political assassinations were key destabilizing events, the Cedar Revolution being sparked by former PM Rafiq Hariri’s assassination in February 2005; other notable political elites have since been assassinated.

Political elites also mobilized protests. After Hariri’s assassination, both pro- and anti-Syria elites mobilized masses: on March 8, Hezbollah’s Hassan Nasrallah called for demonstrations in support of Syrian presence in Lebanon; in response, anti-Syrian parties mobilized on March 14. The March 8 and March 14 coalitions—shaped by political elites’ perceptions of Syria, reflected security dynamics beyond Lebanon, and institutionalized as the dominant cleavage in Lebanese politics.

Elites have been at the forefront of decision deadlocks, protests, and structural change. Contingencies between segments were triggered by the UNSCR 1559/2004

rendering Syrian presence in Lebanon illegitimate, which reflected the shifting international and regional security dynamics. Between 2005 and 2019, Lebanon faced almost 3 years without a president (6 months from the end of Emile Lahoud's mandate to the election of Michel Sleiman, and two years and five months from the end of Sleiman's mandate to the election of Michel Aoun), numerous cabinets, and long periods of negotiations preceding government formation, as political elites struggled and failed to set shared goals. Elections were postponed and governments crumbled in the face of international pressures, armed conflict, and declining public confidence.

With the July War in the background, in November 2006, 2 days before the government was due to discuss the United Nations International Independent Investigation Commission (UNIIC)—an international tribunal for investigating the assassination of PM Hariri, all five Shiite ministers resigned from government. Because the Constitution required 9 out of 24 ministers to resign for the fall of the government, the cabinet remained valid and the parliament voted and passed the draft UNIIC document, based on a constitutional two-thirds majority. Although the President and the Speaker deemed the government unconstitutional—because it lacked Shia representation, the contested government remained in place. With no constitutional arms left, political elites of Amal, Hezbollah and the FPM mobilized a series of street demonstrations demanding a Shia veto power in the government. Demonstrations continued for 17 months, and tensions increased as the debate shifted from the UNIIC file to the presidential election. While Saudi Arabia, the US and France were providing the March 14-led government with political and economic assistance, the March 8 forces vowed to continue protesting until the government fell.

With the end of pro-Syrian President Lahoud's term approaching, political elites failed to elect a new president. Both camps tried to maneuver around the ambiguous constitutional article<sup>39</sup> setting the presidential election procedure: March 14 politicians argued that the inability to elect a president with a two-thirds majority in the first round should have allowed the parliament to fill the position with a simple majority vote in the second round; Hezbollah and its allies insisted that the presidential election invariably necessitates a two-thirds majority. To support the March 8 block, during his last day in office, President Lahoud issued an order indicating the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) should fill the vacuum of the vacant presidency. However, the president is unable to declare a state of emergency without the support of the government.

As tensions escalated, in May 2008 the March 14 controlled government—still lacking Shia representation, pushed Hezbollah's limits by going after the party's communications network. Armed clashes erupted and the Arab League moved to stop the violence. The Doha meeting brought together leaders of Lebanese political parties who agreed to end violence, elect consensus candidate Michel Sleiman as president, redraw the electoral constituencies in accordance with the district system and grant governmental veto power to the opposition by redistributing ministerial seats.<sup>40</sup> The Doha Accord highlighted the system's "inability to avoid changes in its basic structural arrangement, featuring a break into the continuity of its form and pattern," and forcing structural change.<sup>41</sup>

Although a new Cabinet headed by Fouad Siniora was formed in July 2008, the tensions between the March 14 and the March 8 blocs persisted. After the June 2009 elections, Saad Hariri only managed to form a government in December. The March 14

block was further weakened when the PSP withdrew. The struggle moved back to the international level in March 2010, when the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL) summoned several members of Hezbollah for questioning and Nasrallah called on Lebanon to boycott the Tribunal. The National Dialogues—conciliatory meetings between leaders of political parties—were convened, featuring no results.

In January 2011, in the aftermath of the failed Saudi Syrian mediation initiative, Hezbollah and its allies used their governmental veto in response to the STL, orchestrating the fall of the government. Once again international security dynamics unfolded into Lebanese politics. By June 2011, the STL issued arrest warrants for Hezbollah members. The March 8—PSP backed new PM—Najib Mikati was only able to form a government after five months of negotiations.

Mikati resigned due to tensions with March 8 members of government, and Future Movement Tammam Salam was assigned to form a new government in April 2014; the Parliament only passed a vote of confidence in the new cabinet a year later, as Salam threatened to resign several times. With disagreements about the electoral law, elections were postponed twice—first from June to November 2014, then up to 2017, citing Syria-related security concerns. Meanwhile, President Suleiman’s term ended in May 2014, leaving Lebanon, again, without a president.

After March 8-supported Michel Aoun filled the vacancy two years later, in October 2016, Saudi Arabia became increasingly concerned with Iran picking up speed in the region and contributed to the resignation of Saad Hariri in November 2017. Hariri resigned from the Cabinet in a peculiar, televised speech from Saudi Arabia, but later revisited his resignation. In May 2018, parliamentary elections took place under an electoral law that elites had finally agreed on in June 2017. Hariri was proposed again as PM and only managed to negotiate a cabinet in February 2019. Following mass protests and skirmishes, Hariri resigned in October 2019.

### The object of security

Despite political deadlocks, protests, and political violence, Lebanese political elites found their way toward a common identity across ethnic groups: that of being Lebanese. If in traditional approaches to security the referent object is the state, securitization theory posits that actors can construct any group within society as a referent object. The referent object of security is an entity “that is seen to be existentially threatened and that has legitimate claims to survival.”<sup>42</sup> Despite a long history of ethnic divisions, parties prioritize Lebanon as a referent object. Hanf argues that in Lebanon fear has produced compromise and an agreement that coexistence is possible; since the 1980s most of the Lebanese opposed partition, the civil war leading to the emergence of a Lebanese nation.<sup>43</sup> Political parties in Lebanon do not contest the legitimacy of the state but construct it as a common referent object of security, showing commitment to system maintenance. No group challenges the legitimacy of the state, nor puts forward secessionist claims.

Since 2005 political actors invoked primarily *the nation* or *the state of Lebanon* as a referent object. Parties converged on calling for exceptional measures to deal with threats to the state. Future Movement’s Saad Hariri repeatedly declared “my focus is my

state.”<sup>44</sup> Hezbollah called frequently for unity among sects by extending their relative deprivation rhetoric beyond the Shia community: “the Beqa’a region has been a sectarian diversity that must be preserved; people of all denominations and sects suffer from the same deprivation and the security situation is affecting us all.”<sup>45</sup> In 2008, before taking over Beirut, Hezbollah’s Secretary General asked, “who will defend Lebanon, if Hezbollah is disarmed?.” PSP’s Walid Jumblatt cheered for “one voice, one flag”<sup>46</sup> in the “historical moment in 2005 when all Lebanese people, from all sects, were united.”<sup>47</sup> “Let us talk as Lebanese people and as Lebanese parties” said a PSP member.<sup>48</sup> FPM’s leader, Michel Aoun, reiterated “we have different confessions, but we are the same citizens, and we have the same nationality.”<sup>49</sup>

If the Kataeb contests the legitimacy of Hezbollah, they do so by claiming that Hezbollah represents foreign interests: “Hezbollah is not a Lebanese party, because they are supplied, and they take their orders from Iran and from Syria, hence they do not have the highest interest of the State of Lebanon, but they have the highest interest of Syria and Iran”<sup>50</sup> said Marwan Abdallah, the Kataeb’s International Secretary. Similarly, the leader of the LF, Samir Geagea, stressed the importance of the Lebanese state, securing its safety and strengthening state institutions. While prioritizing their minority rights agenda, Tashnag’s leaders also refer to national interest when commenting on the legitimacy of Hezbollah’s weapons: “as long as Hezbollah’s agenda is Lebanese, it is beneficial for Lebanon.”<sup>51</sup>

Lebanese elites elaborated a common referent of security: what “everyone can and should have in the modern world—a nationality.”<sup>52</sup> Elites and civil society activists across both March 8 and 14 blocs share the view that Lebanon’s consociational system is weak,<sup>53</sup> but they are committed to system maintenance. They embrace discursive “Lebanity” and “national identity complements constitutional identity by eliciting loyalty and respect for the political system.”<sup>54</sup> In this sense, Lebanon resembles a traditional polity, with the state as a referent object of security. As political elites have a stable cross-cutting identity—being Lebanese, political stability is not affected by contestations of state legitimacy. However, how political elites interpret statehood, as well as what they consider to be the best policy trajectories for the development of Lebanon depends on the macrosecuritizations they are part of. These interpretations are shaped by how elites construct security and reflected into how they are divided regarding what constitutes a threat to Lebanon.

## **The threats: Syria and Israel**

Political parties’ positions regarding Syria and Israel are central to political instability. These are connected to a system of meanings that flows in opposite directions, and structures political alliances. The way in which threats are interpreted affects political stability. The system of meanings constructed around Lebanon’s policies toward Syria and Israel pulls parties in opposite directions, perpetuating immobilism in alliances as much as in institutions. External actors have been an important source of polarization among parties throughout Lebanon’s history, and as Zahar argues, despite aspiring to

let go of sectarian representations since the days of the Ottoman Empire, Lebanon’s consociational agreement has remained largely unaltered.<sup>55</sup>

How elites interpret external threats constitutes a red line for domestic political alliances—changing alliances, particularly between the March 8 and March 14 blocs, involves a concomitant “correction” of the party’s position regarding the Syrian regime and Hezbollah’s weapons. Whether the shift in alliance precedes the shift in discourse is beyond the scope of this paper, however the two are intertwined in Lebanese domestic politics. These positions are divided along the lines of a core universal theme—the legitimacy of the world order—into two opposing macrosecuritizations, explored in the following sections.

### Is Syria a threat?

If some parties maintained steady relations of antagonism or friendship with Syria, others underwent unexpected discursive shifts (Figure 3). Has the Syrian regime been a benign force for Lebanon? Some parties argue that Syria is a threat because it meddles in Lebanon’s politics. The interference has been oppressive, illegitimate, illegal in accordance with the principles of international law, and violates Lebanon’s sovereignty. Samir Geagea’s party remains committed to preventing Syrian interference. Elsy Oueiss, the party’s International Secretary explained that “Syria never had a positive role in Lebanon from Hafez Al-Assad to Bashar Al-Assad.”<sup>56</sup> The Kataeb’s International Secretary believes that Syria has had only negative effects on Lebanon, it never aided consensus among parties, it oppressed opposition and imposed its decisions, even on its allies.<sup>57</sup> The Future Movement has also been critical of Syria since 2005: “the Syrian regime issued a death sentence against me”<sup>58</sup> said Saad Hariri in 2017.

Other parties believe Syria stood by the Lebanese through thick and thin despite the international community’s betrayal. For them, Syria is accused of violating international laws and human rights only by those who accepted an unfair world order, implicitly siding with Israel. These parties avoid referring to Syria’s presence in Lebanon before 2005 as “occupation.” “Your presence in Lebanon is not material or military; you are present in our hearts and souls, and in our past, present, and future; no one can expel

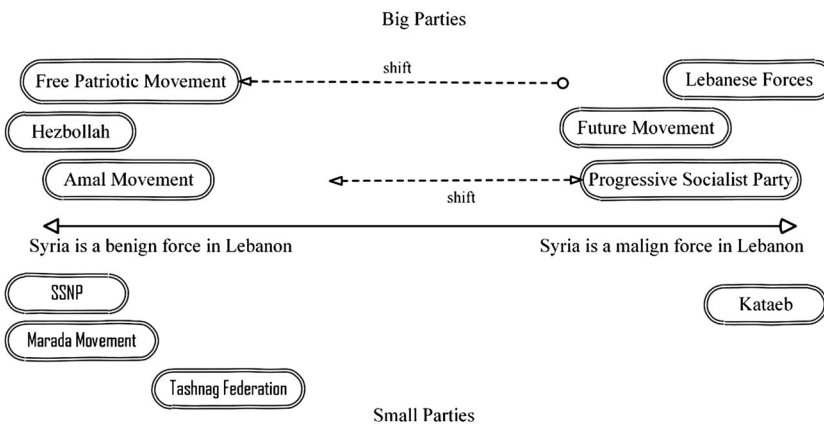


Figure 3. Political parties’ positions regarding Syria.

Syria from Lebanon,” said Hassan Nasrallah.<sup>59</sup> Syria’s trusted ally, Amal, also believes Syria has been an essential benign force with whom the Lebanese should nurture good relations considering their common history, geography, and interests.

For Tashnag, Syrian presence in Lebanon was benign: it provided stability, preserving peace between Lebanese parties, security, and protecting Lebanon from Israel. “Globalization contributed to the increase in anti-Syrian feelings in Lebanon,” the international community playing an important role in nurturing these feelings, a Tashnag member explained.<sup>60</sup> For the SSNP, the Lebanese and the Syrians “share the same destiny,” Syria granting Lebanon “political stability, strength, and prosperity.”<sup>61</sup> For Sleiman Frangieh, leader of the Marada Movement, “Syria is Lebanon’s closest friend.”<sup>62</sup>

The PSP and the FPM underwent radical shifts regarding Syria. Aoun, the anti-Syrian army general forced into exile between 1991 and 2005, returned and joined the March 14 coalition with his newly founded party. Aoun praised Lebanon’s newly gained freedom, sovereignty, and independence, and maintained an anti-Syrian rhetoric: “a black cloud oppressed Lebanon for 15 years, today the sun of freedom is shining.”<sup>63</sup> Aoun’s rhetoric shifted in 2006, when FPM left the March 14 coalition and joined March 8. Aoun visited Damascus in 2008 and described the event as a mark of “returning to normal relations” with Syria, which “held the promise of a bright future.”<sup>64</sup>

If the FPM’s position remained consistent since, the PSP’s position oscillated. While being an integral part of the March 14 alliance, Walid Jumblatt suggested “that the US army should expand its invasion of Iraq by marching into Syria,”<sup>65</sup> and directly insulted Assad in 2007: “the tyrant of Damascus [is] the monkey, the snake, the whale, the monster, and not even a half-decent man.”<sup>66</sup> In 2010, Jumblatt reconciled with Assad as he shifted his domestic allegiance to the March 8 coalition. Referring to his previous statements, Jumblatt declared that he came to view Syria in a more positive light: “I said, at a moment of anger, what is improper and illogical against President Bashar Al-Assad; it was a moment of ultimate internal tension and division in Lebanon.”<sup>67</sup> Shortly after, Jumblatt visited Damascus. In the coming years, Jumblatt reverted to his anti-Syrian rhetoric.

During the Syrian civil war, the system of narratives highlighted the Assad regime in the context of the two opposing macrosecuritizations: in favor or against the world order. For some parties, Bashar Al-Assad is the victim of a conspiracy orchestrated by the international community, whose plans require a change of regime in Syria, and its replacement with one that is friendly to Israel and to the Americans. For Hezbollah, this conspiracy began with the assassination of Rafiq Hariri and culminated with the onset of the war: it does not matter if Syria is destroyed, “the important thing is for the [Assad] regime to go.”<sup>68</sup> Hezbollah’s leader confirmed that Russian, Iranian and Syrian leadership had an input in Hezbollah’s decision to fight alongside Assad, and guaranteed that Syria’s “true friends” were going to prevent its “fall into the hands of the Americans, Israel, or Sunni extremists.”<sup>69</sup> Amal described the Arab Spring in Syria as a “targeted conspiracy” that intended to “lead to a new Sykes-Picot agreement”<sup>70</sup> to redive the region for the benefit of the Israelis. Berri cited the importance of a “Saudi-Iranian reconciliation” for peace in Syria,<sup>71</sup> and claimed that the Assad regime was targeted because of its role in the Resistance movement: “I am looking for Syria in a haystack known as Nations Games,” said Berri. Similarly, Aoun endorsed Assad and

expressed hope that Russian military intervention “would fix Assad’s government.”<sup>72</sup> For the SSNP and Marada, Syria fell prey to American and globalist interests in the region.

For other parties, Bashar Al-Assad is a dictator that refused to give up power; he violates human rights, despises democracy, and is power greedy. For the LF, the fall of Assad would constitute a “gift to the whole world.”<sup>73</sup> Geagea condemned Iranian and Russian intervention backing Assad, and highlighted: if the March 8 coalition governs, the resources of the Lebanese state are “poured into the struggle between the axis which begins in Iran and ends on the Mediterranean shores in Lebanon, and those who are described by Iran as being enemies of the Resistance.”<sup>74</sup> Hariri expressed hope that the Assad regime would fall, because the regime’s policies are closely aligned to those of Iran, a destructive country in the region. Hariri acknowledged that international forces were impeding Assad’s fall, and argued that instead of working with Assad, he “would rather deal with President Putin.”<sup>75</sup> Jumblatt expressed discontent with Russia and Iran’s support for Assad, and disappointment with the West for “abandoning the Syrian People and not helping them in their civil revolution.”<sup>76</sup>

### ***How to tackle the Israeli threat?***

All political parties securitize Israel but disagree on how to tackle the threat. The LAF’s failures to protect Lebanon accentuate commitment problems: “where states have failed, the logic of threat perception linked to the armed capabilities of other actors works more directly.”<sup>77</sup> Political parties disagree regarding the legitimacy of security alternatives to the LAF. Some steadily supported Hezbollah’s armed wing. Hezbollah, Amal, SSNP, and Marada believe that the weapons are necessary to protect Lebanon, the Resistance being the only tool that achieved tangible results against Israel. Berri describes the Resistance as a symbol of honor and glory, while the SSNP depicts the Resistance as “a source of strength for Lebanon.”<sup>78</sup> With more restraint, Tashnag also agrees Hezbollah’s weapons can have a positive impact on Lebanon. On the other side, parties believe that Hezbollah’s weapons harm Lebanon. For LF and Kataeb Hezbollah’s weapons have a negative impact on Lebanon, and Hezbollah should not conduct military actions independent from the LAF, which should be the only holder of weapons in Lebanon. Although the leaders of the Future Movement spoke with more restraint at times, Hariri declared that his party will not compromise regarding its opposition to Hezbollah’s “illegitimate arms.”<sup>79</sup>

The FPM shifted from opposition to support in 2006, coinciding with the party’s transition from the March 14 to the March 8 coalition. Similarly, Jumblatt pivoted from strong opposition to Hezbollah’s military wing, to reconsidering: “I evaluated the May 7 [2008] period, and we were on the brink of getting trapped in a domestic conflict, so I reverted to the roots of the PSP and the Jumblatt family in defending Lebanon from an Arab and Palestinian perspective” said Jumblatt in 2011.<sup>80</sup> The shift also coincided with the PSP’s move from the March 14 to the March 8 coalition.

The dichotomy between the blocs has normative foundations in elites’ perspectives of the role of the world order in Lebanon’s defense. Some believe that entrusting security to the state solely is dangerous because the state system is controlled by the pro-Israeli

macrosecuritization and would not defend Lebanon if Israel invaded. Others hold that the Lebanese should cooperate with the international community to strengthen the army and disarm Hezbollah.

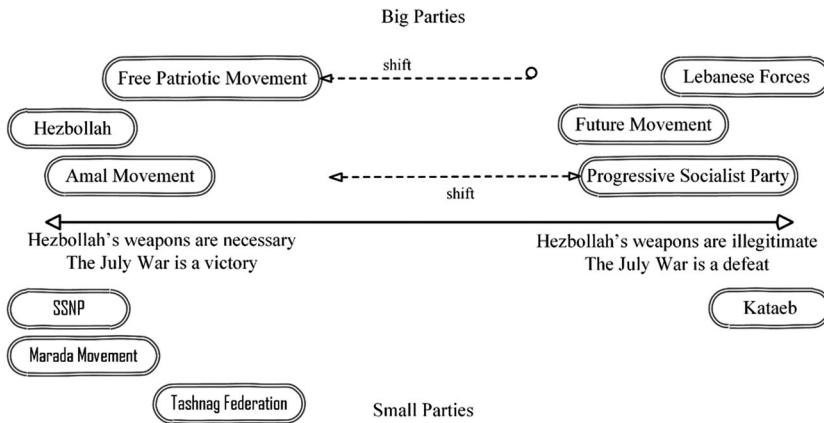
For Hezbollah and its allies, international institutions favor Israel and control the LAF. Because the international community failed to punish Israeli aggressions, Hezbollah's weapons are Lebanon's only defense. The March 8 affiliated parties argue that even though the Israelis violated UNSC Resolution 1701, there was no international reaction from the Americans and many Western countries, proof that the Resistance should keep its weapons: "having experience with the international community, the only way [to address the Israeli threat] is by building our own power to be able to fight back; the Resistance is the only option"<sup>81</sup> said Alaa Al Mawala, Senior Shiite leftist activist. "We know that for the Europeans Israel is a priority, not Lebanon," said Rebecca El-Hosry, International Secretary of Marada.<sup>82</sup>

Some March 8 affiliated parties argue that the US, France, and Saudi Arabia intervene in Lebanon's politics and create alliances with Westernized elites:<sup>83</sup> "the American Project in Lebanon is about having an authority that is loyal to them, carries out their orders and achieves their goals in the region,"<sup>84</sup> said Nasrallah. The SSNP interviewee argued that such politicians "work for the interests of others instead of Lebanon," and described Future Movement's Fouad Siniora as a "a hypocrite and an American and a Saudi puppet" for distancing the government from Hezbollah during the July war.<sup>85</sup>

According to these parties, Hezbollah has a positive impact because it works in tandem with the LAF. El-Hosry described Hezbollah's cooperation with the LAF as natural.<sup>86</sup> For the FPM, the "Resistance's arms are not contrary to the state project," they complement the LAF as "an essential part of Lebanon's defense."<sup>87</sup> Hezbollah works side by side with the LAF in Lebanon's "trilogy: people, army, and resistance," said the SSNP interviewee. Although aspiring to a state army makes sense, for the time being Hezbollah must fill the gap, according to some Tashnag members.

The other side argues that Israel can only be contained through state behavior: "we know that Israel has not respected UNSCRs, and we are against that, but that does not mean Lebanon can afford to disassociate with the international entity, because we need its protection"<sup>88</sup> said Kataeb's International Secretary. For the March 14 parties, Hezbollah is, as described by civil society expert Ayman Mhanna, "an illegitimate non-state actor according to international law."<sup>89</sup> The LF claims that Hezbollah's weapons violate sovereignty and impede the establishment of a strong and capable state: "we do not support Hezbollah's Resistance because it is an illegal militia, and we look toward the international community and the West" said Elsy Oueiss.<sup>90</sup> Saad Hariri emphasized the importance of the army as the only legitimate armed force and showed openness to cooperate with the US and other Western powers to strengthen it.

The contentions regarding Hezbollah's arms show the two macrosecuritizations at play. Hezbollah identifies the "American-Israeli-Arab-Western conspiracy" as the reason why Lebanon needs Hezbollah to defend itself;<sup>91</sup> Hezbollah needs backing from "the Axis of Resistance," which includes Iran and Syria, and to a lesser extent, Russia. Nabih Berri does not shy away from implying that the US fuels conflict in the region by supporting Israel,<sup>92</sup> but has a pivotal position, viewing Saudi Arabia as a potential ally, in the event of a Syria-Saudi Arabia reconciliation. Since 2006 the



**Figure 4.** Political parties' positions regarding Hezbollah's weapons and the July War.

FPM has occasionally pointed fingers at the West, and in 2013 Aoun declared that he was stunned by the EU's decision to list Hezbollah's military wing on its terrorism list.

On the opposite end, LF leadership criticizes Hezbollah for using its weapons in the interests of the "axis of resistance" instead of the Lebanese people and labels it an Iranian proxy.<sup>93</sup> As do the Future Movement and Kataeb. While part of the March 14 coalition, PSP emphasized that Hezbollah and its weapons were a "phenomenon with a regional dimension, embodied by Syria and Iran,"<sup>94</sup> and claimed that disarming Hezbollah requires "convincing Khamenei," the major impediment lying in the axis of Resistance.<sup>95</sup>

The 2006 war highlighted the standoff between the two macrosecuritizations: elites disagree even in times of war. Although Israel was attacking Lebanon with air strikes, hitting civilians, and destroying infrastructure, cohesion among political elites did not increase. On the contrary: Lebanese PM and leader of the Future Movement, Fouad Siniora, distanced the government from the Hezbollah raid that triggered the Israelis: "the government was not aware of and does not take responsibility for, nor endorses what happened on the international border."<sup>96</sup> On the other side, Nabih Berri was trying to persuade the Arab world that "Israel was not fighting Hezbollah, it was waging war on all of Lebanon,"<sup>97</sup> and pro-Syrian President Emile Lahoud was making efforts to persuade the Lebanese public the Resistance was Lebanese.<sup>98</sup> Elites' retrospective perceptions of the July War reflect a stable cleavage: the March 14 coalition parties describe the war as a defeat; those aligned with the March 8 alliance see it as a victory (Figure 4).

### Competing macrosecuritizations

Political elites' perceptions of Syria and Hezbollah's weapons are clustered into a system of narratives that reflects contestations of the Liberal International Order (LIO). The security constellation is composed of two macrosecuritizations—those who adhere to the LIO, and those who contest it. Actors make "political claims about threats to the

institutions of international society, which are universalist in the sense that they take the global level international social structure as their referent object.”<sup>99</sup> According to Mearsheimer, “serious cracks began to appear in the LIO through the first decade of the 2000s,” becoming evident by 2005.<sup>100</sup> The LIO is criticized for “working in favor of Western societies and elites, having neo-liberal flavor, applying double standards, and institutionalizing state inequality.”<sup>101</sup> Its critics argue that the LIO’s increasingly powerful international institutions limit participation in the international arena to sovereign states, and gained legitimacy by enforcing liberal rights, rules, and decisions.

Lebanese political elites’ disagreements regarding Syria and Israel fit these themes. March 14 endorses the existing order universalism embracing international security with the state at its core. March 8 has made opposition to the world order integral to its identity and principles. The most relevant external actors contesting the LIO are Syria, Iran, and Russia; supporting the LIO: Saudi Arabia, Israel, France, and the USA.

The two macrosecuritizations are flexible in the sense that they embody tensions across levels, between the overarching macrosecuritizations and the lower-level securitizations, as members of macrosecuritizations are not necessarily in complete agreement and can change their positions; but at the same time stable in the sense that they maintain a link across levels, between members, and in relation to larger patterns of security. A lower-level securitization of special relevance for Lebanon is the Saudi-Iranian regional conflict. Its spillover effect into Lebanese politics was highlighted in November 2017, with Saudi Arabia pushing PM Saad Hariri to resign. The competing concentric circles of power were then highlighted by Nasrallah: “I do not know Russia as well as I know Iran, [but] there is no sign suggesting that Russian leaders are about to abandon the situation in Syria,”<sup>102</sup> even if the “US ‘Zionist lobby’ pushed for Western strikes on Syria.”<sup>103</sup> On the other side, Hariri called for support from the international community, expressed his gratitude to the friendship of President Emmanuel Macron<sup>104</sup> and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.<sup>105</sup>

## Conclusions

Political parties’ memberships in competing macrosecuritizations influence political stability, elite compromise remaining highly dependent on international and regional security dynamics. Political stability in Lebanon is not affected by contestations of the state: despite a long history of interethnic conflict, elites have a cross-cutting identity—being Lebanese, and a common referent object of security—the Lebanese state. However, Lebanon is pressured by contestations of the LIO, political cleavages being structured by a higher order securitization. March 8 parties integrate into the macrosecuritization contesting the LIO, which includes Syria, Iran, and Russia; March 14 parties are part of the macrosecuritization supporting the LIO, backed by the USA, France, Saudi Arabia, and Israel.

Political elites’ disagreements regarding external actors are linked to this. Elites securitizing Syria believe the Assad regime is anti-democratic and violates international law and Lebanon’s sovereignty. Elites who do not securitize Syria perceive it as a loyal friend that stood by Lebanon when the international community betrayed it. The mistrust in the LIO is why some parties believe Hezbollah’s weapons are Lebanon’s only

line of defense—the Resistance strengthens the state and works in tandem with the LAF. The other political elites abide by international law, argue that the Resistance is illegal and illegitimate, and that it weakens the state.

The macrosecuritizations inform lower-level securitizations, facilitating institutional deadlocks, and putting pressure on parties' cross-cutting identity. Even if parties attempt to reach across the aisle, collaboration between members of opposing macrosecuritizations requires one of the parties to undergo a shift. Such shifts entail a correction of the party's positions regarding Syria and Hezbollah's weapons, and more broadly, in respect to the LIO security constellation. Competing macrosecuritizations are stable enough to block elite cooperation even in periods of international crisis and war. During the July War, political elites' securitization of a common threat and the broad consensus within society against the enemy failed to increase elite cohesion. Instead, the Israeli offensive increased cohesion among members of each macrosecuritization, the domestic political cleavage deepening as Lebanese parties sought to "package together securitizations to a higher and larger order."<sup>106</sup>

In post-2005 Lebanon, where parties have found a common identity and show commitment to system maintenance, elites' memberships in opposing macrosecuritizations cause political instability and challenge the implementation of the consociational agreement. However, in cases where domestic parties are yet to find a common identity, elites' memberships in competing macrosecuritizations may end consociational agreements and become central to conflict onset and escalation. Even if the agreement survives in the absence of a common identity across segments, elites' memberships in opposing macrosecuritizations can hinder the construction of a cross-cutting identity, withholding polities' transcendence of short-term conflict management.

Future research should consider how elites' memberships in competing macrosecuritizations may inform the endurance of consociational agreements, the long-term construction and maintenance of a common identity across segments, as well as conflict onset and escalation. As political elites become dependent on top-down security solutions, top-down security may fuel inter-sectarian tensions, especially if external actors share common ethnic or religious features with the domestic actors they support; and it may replicate regional and international conflicts into domestic politics, "preventing leaders of social groups with heterogeneous and overlapping memberships from adopting moderate positions."<sup>107</sup> More broadly, political parties' memberships in competing macrosecuritizations can impact the prerequisites of consociation: macrosecuritizations can shift commitment to system maintenance, alter the meaning of fragmentation, impede elites' ability to forge common solutions, and shift power-balance.

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