



Arab Reform Initiative

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Lebanese Communities Abroad: Feeding and Fuelling Conflicts

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Lebanon, a small republic of 6 million inhabitants, is both an emigration prone country¹ and a key destination for refugee movements and migrant workers. While an estimated 885,000 first generation Lebanese migrants live abroad,² sources report that about fourteen million people of Lebanese descent live in numerous countries worldwide. Additionally, Lebanon has been a key destination for both refugees and migrant workers.³ Since the 1950s, the small polity has received displaced populations from various refugee producing countries in the Arab world, namely Palestine, Iraq, and more recently Syria. Lebanon is also a traditional destination for domestic and migrant workers from Africa and South-east Asia.

Lebanon's complex migratory dynamics notwithstanding, this paper will concentrate on the Lebanese diaspora's engagement and interaction with Lebanon's war and post-war politics. It will shed light on the Lebanese diasporas' involvement in development and political affairs, showing that while the Lebanese diaspora communities engage in various economic, community and political activities, their involvement does not challenge the nature of sectarian politics. Rather the political fragmentation of diaspora communities replicates and perpetuates modes of sectarian mobilization.

1. The Characteristics of the Lebanese Diaspora

Lebanon's history of emigration has unfolded in various waves, and its diaspora can be characterized as both 'entrepreneurial' and 'conflict induced' as many Lebanese emigrated in search of new economic opportunities and to seek more stable living environments.⁴

In the 19th century, Lebanon's first emigrants sought new destinations in Latin, Central, and North America to improve their economic livelihoods and to escape inter-confessional tensions. In the wake of Lebanon's independence from French rule and the establishment of the Lebanese state in 1943, Lebanese began emigrating throughout the world, namely Australia, Western Europe, the Gulf countries, and West Africa. As the Civil War raged from 1975 until 1990, they escaped instability and conflict by moving to North America and Australia. Germany and Sweden also became popular destinations for both Lebanese and



Palestinians who fled conflict in southern Lebanon following Israel's military operations in the 1970s and 1980s. However, once the war ended, emigration did not subside. Limited employment opportunities and ongoing conflicts, such as the 2006 July War between Hezbollah and Israel, prompted the Lebanese to move to the Gulf, Western Europe, and North America. Today, it remains to be seen whether increasingly restrictive Western migration regimes and security measures against migrants in the Gulf region will lead to a decrease in Lebanese emigration.

Though the Lebanese who emigrated prior to the 1980s were mostly low-skilled labourers, Lebanon's diaspora is actually highly educated.⁵ The financial support that Lebanese abroad, largely in the Gulf, Africa, and North America, send back to Lebanon constitute about fifteen to twenty percent of Lebanon's Gross National Product. While it is not clear whether they have boosted societal development, this money has contributed to supporting households and stabilizing Lebanon's economy through providing liquidity and capital flows in critical moments.⁶

2. Divides within the Lebanese Diaspora

The Lebanese diaspora's political connections with their homeland are complex. They should be read in the context of Lebanon's domestic system, commonly framed as confessional or sectarian power sharing. In Lebanon's model of politics, representation is ensured through predetermined sectarian arrangements: the president is a Maronite Christian, the prime minister is Sunni, and the speaker of parliament is Shia. Parliamentary seats are divided according to the parity between Muslims and Christians, and civil service appointments conform to fixed sectarian quotas. There is a scholarly consensus that this political model weakens institutional building while encouraging sectarian-based power constellations on both the local national levels. Members of a certain community rally behind their confessional leader to ensure their political interests are represented by Lebanon's domestic politics. In general, Lebanese communities abroad have maintained an interest in Lebanese politics⁷ and have expressed their desire to be recognized as a political force. For example, they have repeatedly proposed allocating a parliamentary seat to represent the diaspora's interests.⁸ Additionally, individuals of Lebanese descent have petitioned the government for citizenship and a myriad of diaspora organizations have lobbied to introduce Out of Country Voting (OVT).



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Throughout the country's major conflict episodes, such as Lebanon's Civil War and the 2006 Hezbollah-Israel War, the Lebanese diaspora have played a conflict alleviation role. However, their patterns of polarization are embedded within Lebanon's internal conflicts. During Lebanon's civil war, from 1975 to 1990, and its aftermath, during the 1990s, they financially contributed by sending money to their families and villages (Labaki 2006; Hourani 2007).⁹ They also raised awareness and appealed to Western governments during Lebanon's war to offer asylum to those fleeing political violence. With the outbreak of the 2006 July War between Hezbollah and Israel, communities abroad sent donations and resources to aid those in Southern Lebanon.¹⁰ Additionally, communities in Africa and North America organized series of protests to demonstrate solidarity with their fellow countrymen. Lebanese Canadians even petitioned, albeit unsuccessfully, the Harper government to revise its pro-Israeli stance at the time (Fakhoury unpublished).

However, despite demonstrations of solidarity and financial aid, the Lebanese diaspora has neither communicated unified petitions back to their country nor have they mobilized for common goals. Instead, they have strengthened Lebanon's partisan and polarized politics.¹¹ Labaki¹² argues that Lebanon's varied diaspora groups promoted the interests of political parties along sectarian lines throughout the civil war. The Shia-based community in West Africa provided a support platform for the Amal Movement while Christian Lebanese in North America endeavoured to consolidate the power base of Christian parties, such as the Lebanese Forces. At the same time, Lebanon's political leaders established diasporic unions along confessional lines during the war. While the Maronites founded the 'Maronite world Union' initiative in 1979, the Druze also established the international Druze Congress. Shi'a leaders also followed suit and created an initiative for Shia emigrants.¹³ As a result, diaspora loyalties fall within Lebanon's confessional party system. This has thwarted the emergence of a unified and strategic diaspora that could greatly influence conflict resolution initiatives.

In the post-war period diaspora-based organizations supported divergent visions of Lebanon's identity. A study of online diaspora initiatives focusing on the Lebanese diaspora in Canada and France found that Christian and Muslim websites do not interact, attesting to the fragmentation of diaspora activities



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along religious and political lines. While some websites address the transnational Lebanese community, others target the religious community or a certain political faction. In general, religiously-oriented diaspora associations attempt to unite the transnational religious community and to consolidate religion-based solidarity.¹⁴)For example, Shia Lebanese in Senegal have established institutions to promote Shia Islam within the larger transnational Shia community (Leichtman 2017). Likewise, some groups in Europe and North America have founded clubs and associations that specifically target the Christian Lebanese community.

Furthermore, diaspora associations have articulated political agendas that are reflective of Lebanon's polarized political spectrum.¹⁵ Following the withdrawal of Syrian military troops in April 2005, Lebanon has been divided into two overarching factions: the March 8 Alliance and the March 14 Alliance. The March 8 Alliance is led by Hezbollah and its Shia allies, including the Amal Party, and the Christian-based Free Patriotic Movement. The coalition maintains close ties to the Syrian regime and defends Hezbollah's military wing in the context of a weak state and turbulent region. On the other hand, the March 14 Alliance is led by a Sunni group established by former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, the Sunni allies, and various Christian parties, such as the Phalange Party (Kata'ib) as well as the Lebanese Forces. Since 2005, The March 14 Alliance has called for the emancipation of Lebanon from Syria's dominance and the disarmament of Hezbollah. However, following the onset of the Syrian conflict in 2011 the rifts between the two alliances have deepened. The March 8 Alliance has depicted Syria's uprising as the work of foreign powers, while the March 14 Alliance has condemned the Syrian regime's violent response to the revolution.

In addition to reflecting Lebanese communities' divided domestic and external loyalties, the post-2005 divisions are embedded within the broader context of decades of war and its aftermath. The Lebanese diaspora has also been affected by these societal rifts. Some post-war diaspora initiatives link their programs directly to the aftermath of the civil war,¹⁶ while others are offshoots of Lebanese sectarian-based political parties.¹⁷ However, other diaspora groups have positioned themselves within the March 8 and March 14 divide and have sought further their causes through lobbying. For example, in the early 2000s, some US-based diaspora groups linked to the Christian-based Free Patriotic Movement and



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the Lebanese Forces lobbied for the withdrawal of Syrian military troops from Lebanon.¹⁸ Additionally, they supported the American government's Syrian Accountability Act (SAA) that would later influence UN Resolution 1559 calling for the departure of foreign troops in Lebanon. Similarly, these movements were encouraged by international calls to end the Syrian presence in Lebanon and to full implement the 1989 post-war Ta'if agreement.

Keen on spreading the 2005 'Cedar Revolution', during which Lebanese citizens and anti-Syrian groups rallied against the Syrian military presence, certain diaspora-based associations began promoting the March 14 Alliance's political projects. These projects called for a free and sovereign Lebanon emancipated from Syria's foreign policy while simultaneously creating a rapprochement with the West.¹⁹ In contrast, Lebanon's Islamic foundations in West African countries, such as Senegal, have close connections with Shia political parties and have supported Iran's regional role in the Middle East. Hezbollah, Lebanon's Shia party with close ties with the Syrian regime and Iran, receives financial support and resources from the Shia diaspora community.²⁰

These divergences and polarization patterns need to be understood in the context of several factors. Lebanon's model of sectarian power sharing encourages sectarian competition and political fragmentation. Since 1943, there have been conflicting stances over Lebanon's regional and international ties as well as Lebanon's national identity. While some factions have pleaded for closer relations with the West, others have called for stronger regional connections with Arab states and Iran. As various authors emphasize, Lebanese diaspora politics are intricately linked to the political polarization in the country and reflect Lebanon's fragmented local and transnational alliances.²¹

In this context, political parties, thrive on diaspora support to strengthen their power base. Many parties, such as the Sunni Future Current and the Christian-based Free Patriotic Current, have established diaspora bureaus to increase interactions with communities abroad. These offices also serve to leverage ties with the diaspora during elections.²² Just before the 2009 parliamentary elections, Lebanese communities in Australia were also divided between the March 8 and March 14 Alliances, replicating the Lebanon's polarization at the time. Lebanon's political parties lured expatriates to vote through providing free plane tickets and



vote buying.²³ In fact, during the 2009 elections, a significant influx of Lebanese emigrants in the Beirut airport was reported.²⁴

The diaspora communities have endeavoured to bolster the political parties in Lebanon by contributing financially, largely in the form of donations. From this perspective, Lebanon's diaspora politics should be understood as a transnational continuum where local and external actors reinforce Lebanon's confessional politics.

3. The Diaspora and Development Efforts

The proliferation of diaspora-based cultural, charitable, and socio-economic organizations hint at a rich and dense 'transnational social field' that are intended to be apolitical.²⁵ Various Lebanese professional and student associations worldwide have promoted a non-sectarian vision of Lebanon. Instead, they focus on development efforts and citizen inclusiveness. Additionally, in recent years, organizations interested in consolidating economic ties with Lebanon have become prominent actors in the development field. In 2013, Lebanon for Entrepreneurs (LFE), an alliance of diaspora organizations, was established to aid the development of the technology start-up ecosystem in Lebanon. One of these diaspora organizations, Lebnet, a network of Lebanese-American professionals, aims to consolidate relationships between Lebanese professionals in North America and Lebanese entrepreneurs in Lebanon. Some research-based institutes abroad, such as Moise Khayrallah Center for Lebanese Diaspora Studies in North Carolina, has encouraged increasing research on Lebanese migration.²⁶

This research has unveiled the positive effects the Lebanese diaspora has had on development, sustainability, and reconstruction efforts. Both private and public transnational networks have been particularly active in funding schools, building public monuments, and improving the provisions of services in disadvantaged areas in Northern and Southern Lebanon. In the wake of the 2006 July war, they funded hospitals and financially supported healthcare initiatives.²⁷ Surveys demonstrate that financial support provided by the Lebanese community in Nigeria has been instrumental to families residing in certain remote regions (Adelbayo, 2010, 72).²⁸



However, the diaspora's efforts in post-war reconstruction have also been the subject of controversy. The *Solidere* project, tasked with the reconstruction of post-war Beirut, was financed by former Prime Minister Rafiq el Hariri, who had close ties to Saudi Arabia, making the project the subject of numerous debates. These discussions centred on Lebanon's dependency on investments from the Gulf, which had marginalized public opinion on the reconstruction of post-war Beirut. Additionally, financial assistance from the diaspora have diverted attention from the state's inability to implement structural reforms (Tierney 2015).

4. The Lebanese State's and the Diaspora

The Lebanese state has failed to develop comprehensive policies regarding the diaspora. Historically, Lebanon has not hindered emigration as it has alleviated unemployment and financial contributions from the diaspora have boosted the national economy. Policy makers have consistently courted Lebanese emigrants in their speeches, stressing their strategic importance to Lebanon's cultural, political and economic capital. In 1964, the government approved the establishment of the World Lebanese Union (WLU) tasked to represent all Lebanese abroad and to channel their involvement in homeland politics. However, the WLU, which later evolved into the World Lebanese Cultural Union (WLCU), was divided by the civil war. It was only in 1994 that the Lebanese State created the Ministry of Emigrants. In the same year, the Lebanese state decreed the establishment of the Investment Development Authority of Lebanon (IDAL) as the 'National Investment Promotion Agency' that offers advice and incentives to expatriate investors.

In recent years, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Emigrants launched a diaspora initiative called 'the Lebanese Diaspora Energy' which calls on Lebanese expatriates to participate in a yearly conference to deliberate on issues at the heart of development, reconstruction, and finance. Since 2014, the Lebanese Diaspora Energy founded various platforms to facilitate the diaspora's contributions to Lebanon's development. The Lebanon Connect Online and Mobile Platform fosters economic opportunities between Lebanese communities around the world and the Invest to Stay program devises incentives for expatriates who invest in touristic, economic, construction, and social projects. The diaspora can also collaborate with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as well as the Ministry of



Education and Higher Education to establish schools abroad that would follow the typical Lebanese curriculum.

The recent Diaspora Energy initiative has also received praise for encouraging dialogue between the state and the diaspora which has increased the diaspora's involvement in homeland affairs. However, Lebanon is far from a comprehensive political engagement strategy with its diaspora. Recently, the issues of obtaining citizenship and political representation have been overlooked. Lebanon has always hesitated to grant citizenship and political rights to the diaspora. Some worry that allowing diaspora members access to citizenship would disrupt the Muslim-Christian balance and Lebanon's sectarian power sharing model.²⁹ However, some progress has been made with the diaspora's political rights. In 2008 the government approved OVT for the first time. Although there have not been many opportunities to exercise this right as elections have not taken place since 2009 due to a political deadlock.

5. International Organizations and the Diaspora

In the context of a weak national strategy, international organizations founded initiatives to harness the potential of the Lebanese diaspora. The most prominent initiatives are the Transfer of Knowledge Through Expatriate Nationals (TOKTEN) and LIVE Lebanon programs, both managed by the United Nations Development Program. The TOKTEN Program invites Lebanese expatriates to work on a six-month consultancy mission or project in the areas of capacity building, governance, and research in various domains. The program has been credited for uniting international local experts. (Fakhoury 2015). More recently, TOKTEN has allowed for online knowledge transfers between homeland institutions and Lebanese abroad. The Live Lebanon project encourages collaborative projects between Lebanon and its diaspora members. It focuses on youth empowerment, education, restoring green areas, overhauling the healthcare system, and creating income-generating activities in disadvantaged areas. Furthermore, Live Lebanon has developed the concept of the Goodwill ambassador, calling upon eminent expatriates to support humanitarian and economic initiatives in Lebanon.



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The overarching strategy of both TOKTEN and Live Lebanon initiatives focus on transforming the diaspora into development partners who contribute to the production of knowledge, empowerment of local communities, and the reduction of socio-economic inequities in Lebanon. While it is difficult to quantify the impact of these two programs on local development, that they have contributed by demonstrating the various ways through which the diaspora can, remotely or through return migration, participate in development efforts.

Conclusion

The Lebanese diaspora has had a complex involvement in with Lebanese politics, both before and after the civil war. The diaspora has participated with the internal Lebanese political scene in numerous ways. On one hand, they have also been divided along Lebanon's sectarian and geopolitical polarities but have also furthered development. The complexity of the diaspora's involvement with their home country has been furthered by the lack of a comprehensive policy on the part of the Lebanese state. Currently, the importance of the diaspora's electoral engagement remains to be seen as they were excluded from political participation for decades. However, despite these obstacles the Lebanese diaspora has played an important role in post-war Lebanon by initiating and participating in development projects, charities, and reconstruction efforts. Looking forward, the Lebanese diaspora's involvement with conflict resolution and post-conflict reconstruction could serve as an example for the Syrian diasporas.

Drawing on these insights, future research concentrated on the Syrian diaspora's possible influence in the post-conflict reconstruction should examine how post-conflict political and economic structures in Syria would shape the contributions of the diaspora, either as nation building agents or perpetrators of state divisions. Additionally, the Syrian diaspora's role in post-conflict Syria will be shaped by various factors: the future Syrian regime, the future regime's position towards the diaspora, the integration of Syrian groups abroad, and the diaspora's financial resources.

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