

EMIGRATION AND THE RESILIENCE OF POLITICS IN LEBANON

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*We would not be able to live without emigration, but if emigration
became too vast, it could be the end of us.*

—Michel Chiha

The politicians are all thieves.
But don't people vote for the politicians?

The people are all donkeys.
But aren't there many Lebanese with a high level of education?
The educated people all leave.

—Conversation with Beirut cab driver

The popular uprisings that spread throughout the Middle East and North Africa in 2011 surprised the world with the speed and force with which they unsettled or collapsed seemingly stable regimes. No less puzzling for observers and residents of the region, however, was how such regimes had

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survived as long as they did. In opinion polls and conversations in cafes and living rooms, Arab publics had long voiced discontent with autocracy, corruption, and the lack of accountability of political elites. Still, those elites managed to hold power year after year.

What accounts for the paradoxical coexistence of pervasive grievance with political regimes, on the one hand, and their persistence, on the other? Decades of scholarship on politics in the Arab world cites a range of factors, from leaders' manipulation of electoral rules¹ to the strength of state coercive apparatuses,² and from governments' co-optation of business elites³ to the entrenchment of single-party institutions.⁴ While varied in their foci, these works manifest a fundamental commonality in their approach. All consider the endurance of autocratic leaders to be a direct consequence of the actions that they take toward that end. This article takes a different approach. It shifts attention from the purposeful design of political structures to processes that occur at the societal level. My aim is to explore how even seemingly apolitical phenomena can sustain an existing structure and practice of politics by defusing potential challenges to the status quo. One such phenomenon, prominent in the Middle East and North Africa as throughout the developing world, is emigration.

At first glance, Lebanon appears an odd case with which to probe relationships underpinning the resilience of political systems in the Arab world. Other states in the region have seen the same monarchs or "presidents for life" reign for decades on end. Lebanese politics, by contrast, has been more prone to upheaval than to enduring domination by a single person, family, or political party. Lebanon has a confessional political system in which seventeen religious sects are guaranteed representation and parliamentary elections are fiercely contested. Its state is also regarded as being among the weakest in the region. Nevertheless, in fundamental regards, the nature of politics in Lebanon is similar to that in other Arab countries. Lebanon is characterized by clientelism, endemic corruption, weak rule of law, personalization of power, and insufficient provision of basic social services. It is dominated by a political oligarchy that extracts private gain from public office and maneuvers the population's insecurity and material scarcity to maintain power or bequeath it to relatives. As elsewhere in the region, Lebanon's governments have failed to generate opportunities for employment, particularly for ever-swelling numbers of university graduates.

This article explores how emigration serves as an informal mechanism contributing to the perpetuation of the structure and practice of politics in Lebanon. Its purpose is theory building. Rather than a conclusive test of a causal argument, it seeks to encourage attention to oft-overlooked relationships, theorize and explore their functioning in practice, and thereby broaden debates about both the sustaining of political systems and the consequences of international migration. Research on migration from developing countries has tended to focus on the effect of immigration upon the countries where migrants settle more than on those from whence they come. In decades past, leading scholars observed this tendency in their research on the case of Lebanese emigration.⁵ As Albert Hourani noted in 1992, “Little has been written about the influence of the emigrant colonies on Lebanon itself.”⁶ Since then, many important works have probed various kinds of influences. Akram Khater demonstrates that emigration between 1890 and 1920, as well as remittances and return migration, helped to change gender roles and forge a middle class in Mount Lebanon.⁷ Ilham Khuri-Makdisi traces the circulation of radical ideas among diasporic communities across the late Ottoman Eastern Mediterranean, showing how they shaped both ideological movements and society back home.⁸ Sarah Gualtieri considers how pre-World War II Syrian-Lebanese immigrants to the United States came to view themselves in racial terms, with ramifications for ethnic identity formation in receiving and sending countries alike.⁹ Turning to the contemporary era, Laurie Brand examines the evolution of government institutions and policies toward emigration and nationals abroad, finding commonalities and differences in how Lebanon and other Arab states seek to manage expatriate affairs.¹⁰

These works have greatly contributed to our understanding of the effects of outmigration on Lebanon, particularly in past eras. Nonetheless, many topics want for research, among them the effect of migration on sustaining structures and practices of politics today. Putting this question in the spotlight, this article argues that emigration serves several functions that contribute to perpetuating the structure and practice of politics in Lebanon. It presents preliminary propositions based on available literature and five weeks of exploratory fieldwork in Lebanon during the summer of 2008. I invoke references to interviews that I conducted with academics, analysts, and citizens as illustrations of how the proposed effects of migration are

lived and understood from within Lebanese society. The paper proceeds in four sections. The first analyzes politics in Lebanon's sectarian-clientelist system. The second section outlines trends in emigration from Lebanon. The third section elaborates four mechanisms connecting emigration to the resilience of politics, and is followed by a concluding fourth section.

The Structure and Practice of Politics in Lebanon

The domination of Lebanese politics by sectarianism and clientelism has a long history. Ottoman rulers allowed Druze and Christian feudal leaders to dominate their respective communities in exchange for their collection of taxes. After civil violence from 1858-1860, Mount Lebanon was placed under an executive council in which powers were divided among the country's sectarian groups. Upon independence in 1943, Lebanon was confirmed as a confessional democracy in which state offices were distributed among religious communities. It was designed such that elites would represent the interests of their sects and cooperate with leaders of other sects in a shared commitment to maintaining the system.¹¹ This formal political system merged with an informal system of patron-client ties.¹² Political bosses or *zu'ama'* (singular *za'im*) distributed social services, bureaucratic favors, and employment to their clientele, who in turn offered electoral and other support. Public office gave *zu'ama'* access to both personal wealth and the patronage with which they renewed their constituents' loyalty.

In the decades that followed, Lebanon experienced recurrent crises, fifteen years of devastating civil war, and other tumultuous transformations. Nevertheless, the rules of the political game largely persisted. The Lebanese system remains one of horizontal linkages generating coordination between sectarian elites, on the one hand, and vertical linkages based on patron-client dependencies, on the other. During Lebanon's boom years of the 1950s and 1960s, many analysts pointed to the utility of this system for creating conditions of stability and prosperity.¹³ Today as well, some believe that Lebanon has averted some of the popular upheavals seen elsewhere in the Middle East because it better meets its people's needs and aspirations. Its electoral democracy offers competitive elections and freedom of expression. Its living standards are higher than in other non-oil Arab states.

Yet this positive assessment ignores evidence of grave problems. In the wake of recurrent bouts of internal violence, many Lebanese question the capacity of their political structure to guarantee civil peace.¹⁴ The sectarian system entails giving all political bosses a share in decision-making, as well as in the government ministries, control over licensing, and access to contracts that are major sources of wealth. This practice not only leads to waste, but also generates incentives for elites to create crises in an attempt to renegotiate the size of their slice of the pie.¹⁵ The reliance on elite consensus, rather than a legal regime of checks and balances, facilitates politicians' abuse of privilege and protects them from accountability, even when there is abundant evidence that they have broken the law. The result is endemic corruption, vote buying, political interference in the judiciary, the emergence of monopolistic cliques in the private sector, and even the destruction with impunity of antiquities and the environment.¹⁶ Those who do not mince words charge that a cabal of warlords and businessmen rule the country by means of a kind of institutionally legitimized money laundering.¹⁷

Graft-ridden state spending, and the lack of a strong state to define and implement national development priorities further hamper the economy. Lebanon's public debt rose from two billion US dollars in 1992 to forty-two billion US dollars at the end of 2007, when it stood at 171 percent of GDP.¹⁸ The consumer price index has increased by over fifty percent during the past decade, with no corresponding official adjustment of wages.¹⁹ Meanwhile, public provision of basic services remains lacking. Mismanagement of the Lebanese Electricity Company, which one analyst calls "a model case study in corruption because you can find every single kind of corruption inside it,"²⁰ renders daily electricity cuts the norm throughout Lebanon.

Citizens' frustration with this status quo is palpable. Surveys show that Lebanese citizens are "fed up" with corruption and the lack of accountability in public life.²¹ One 2007 public opinion poll showed that citizens longed for leaders who would stand up for "integrity and fighting corruption."²² Another found that more than two thirds of respondents viewed political parties negatively and a plurality claimed that no party represented them.²³ A 2008 poll found that 78.4 percent of respondents did not trust politicians. When asked to identify the country's "number one *za'im*," a plurality said "no one."²⁴ In 2011, hundreds and then thousands took to the streets to call

for an end to sectarianism and the sectarian system. Yet no reforms were enacted, and the protest movement gradually ran out of steam. Despite citizens' complaints about their leadership, elections return the same politicians to office year after year.

What explains the resistance to change of the basic structure and practice of Lebanese politics, despite such broad and profound discontent? Some attribute the resilience to deep-seated sectarian identities and sects' mistrust of one another.²⁵ Another interpretation emphasizes the rational self-interest of leaders who "share a consensus on at least one basic value, the preservation of the system in which they are elites."²⁶ These explanations are telling, yet insufficient. Their emphasis on the endogenous reproduction of political practice ignores the role of at least one exogenous variable: money. According to one analysis of corruption in Lebanon, power brokers need "fuel to keep the engine of this static confessional system rolling and avoid polarization."²⁷ Yet where do such funds come from, given the country's indebtedness?²⁸ One key source of revenue, foreign aid, is an outcome of interstate policy. Another source, migrant workers' remittances, is an informal mechanism operating at the level of society. Not dictated by political actors or transferred for political purposes, its implications for politics are easy to overlook. Yet closer examination suggests that remittances, like the broader phenomenon of emigration from which they spring, may play a critical role in sustaining Lebanon's political status quo.

Emigration from Lebanon

The history of emigration from Lebanon is older than the state itself. As one commentator has expressed it, "Leaving the country is as Lebanese as apple pie is American."²⁹ While overseas migration from Sidon to Egypt began in the nineteenth century,³⁰ mass outflow from Mount Lebanon accelerated with the civil wars at mid-century and the collapse of the country's silk industry in subsequent decades. From 1860-1900, an estimated 120,000 persons left Mount Lebanon, about one fourth of the total population. Most were destined for the Americas. From 1900-14, the rate increased from an average of 3,000 emigrants per year to an estimated 15,000 emigrants per year.³¹ Emigration practically halted when Lebanon was blockaded during World War I, but then resumed, with West Africa emerging as a key destination.

The Arab oil-exporting states attracted migrating Lebanese professionals and workers alike in the 1960s and even more so after the 1973 hike in oil prices. Emigration took on new proportions during the 1975-90 civil war, when some 990,000 people fled the country.³²

Today, an estimated ten to twenty-five percent of Lebanese nationals reside outside the country's borders.³³ In two separate surveys of thousands of households across Lebanon, Choghig Kasparian of Beirut's Université Saint-Joseph produced what is regarded as the most credible profile of contemporary emigrants in comparison to the resident population.³⁴ According to her estimates, about forty-five percent of Lebanese households claim an émigré among their members. Some 466,000-640,000 Lebanese (ten to fourteen percent of the population) emigrated between 1992 and 2007.³⁵ Emigrants tend to be young, with some seventy-seven percent leaving between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five.³⁶ Of male migrants, seventy-three percent left Lebanon in search of employment.³⁷ The number of females emigrating for work more than doubled between the period 1992-96 and 2002-07.³⁸

No less significant than actual migration is prospective migration, or the extent to which residents *expect* to settle or seek work abroad. This phenomenon offers another window on the prominence of outmigration in Lebanon today. Averaging sixteen polls conducted between 1997 and 2007, the research institute MADMA found that thirty-nine percent of respondents had thought about migrating and twenty-two percent had taken serious steps to do so.³⁹ Remittances offer yet another lens for viewing the extent and significance of emigration. Lebanon leads the developing world in remittances per capita.⁴⁰ The money that émigrés send home represents nearly one fourth of Lebanon's GDP, or double the amount of foreign direct investment and twenty percent of official development assistance.⁴¹ As Lebanon's leading expert on the topic explains, "Remittances keep the economy functioning at a higher level than the existing level of risk in the country should allow. They are a lifeline from abroad allowing people to maintain their standards of living."⁴²

According to one calculation, a continuation of emigration at current rates will mean that half of any given generation will have left the country by the age of fifty-nine.⁴³ A familiar lament is that of this resident who has watched her circle of loved ones slowly vanish:

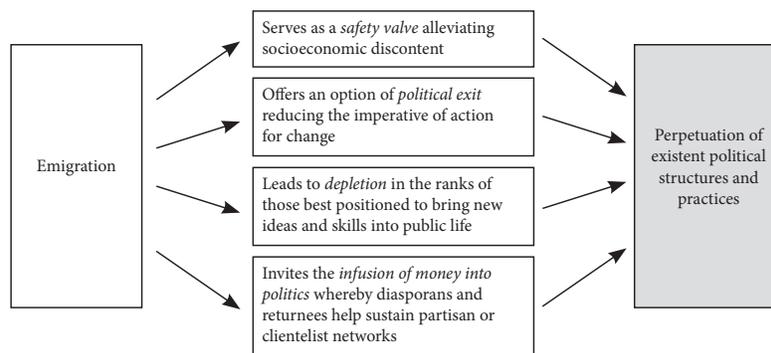
I see my friends leave . . . scattered like leaves in the wind. Some of them are glad to fly away and others are heartbroken. One by one, they get on a plane in order to find a job or complete an education or even follow a spouse. . . . I keep finding myself in Beirut’s airport, standing behind a huge glass window and waving goodbye to some friend or relative that will only come back on a vacation. Lebanon has become what al-Baradoni, a Yemeni poet, once described: “All this is my country, and in it there’s everything except myself and my country.”⁴⁴

Yet the effect of emigration on the home country is not simply one of emptying it of its people. Rather, the phenomenon of people leaving profoundly shapes relationships, attitudes, and behaviors among those who remain behind. Indeed, as a Lebanese journalist put it, emigration is “no longer a phenomenon, but has rather become part of the structure of Lebanese society, almost one of its main components.”⁴⁵ If emigration is a main component of society, it must also be a component of politics. What function does it serve and how?

Emigration and the Resilience of Politics

I propose that emigration serves as an informal mechanism contributing to the persistence of political structures and practices in Lebanon. It helps sustain clientelist and sectarian ways of doing politics through four primary mechanisms. These mechanisms are illustrated in Figure 1 below and are elaborated in the discussion that follows.

Figure 1: Effect of Emigration on the Structure and Practice of Politics in Lebanon



The first proposed mechanism by which emigration contributes to the persistence of political structures and practices in Lebanon is by serving as a “safety valve.” In Lebanon and elsewhere, emigration and its corollary of migrant remittances relieve social, political, and economic discontent that might otherwise become a burden on political elites. Outmigration is akin to a leak in a pressure cooker, dispelling discontent so that it does not reach the point of explosion. Frederick Jackson Turner popularized this notion when he famously argued that the frontier of the American West functioned as an escape route that reduced the probability of unrest in the East. This theory has been carried forward in analyses of contemporary migration from the global South to the industrialized North, which is likewise seen as relieving the strain of demographic growth and diffusing potential instability stemming from people’s unmet aspirations.⁴⁶

These safety valve dynamics can be identified in the Lebanese context. In the view of historian Fawwaz Traboulsi, the dynamics have been in place since the aborted popular revolts of the mid-1800s. He argues that one of the reasons that the land question went unsettled in Lebanon was that peasants began migrating abroad.⁴⁷ Had they remained, socioeconomic hardship might have impelled them to sustain a greater challenge to feudal structures. The fact that many instead sought livelihoods overseas sapped the impetus for agitation for political transformation. A similar dynamic may be present in the contemporary era. Lebanon’s economy, based on trade and services, has long fallen short of producing sufficient employment.⁴⁸ As of 2011, unemployment was between twelve and fourteen percent, reaching twenty percent among people under the age of twenty-five.⁴⁹ Economists project that these figures would be considerably higher if outmigration were not relieving the labor market of job seekers it cannot accommodate. According to economist and pollster Riad Tabbarah, unemployment surveys carried out in June often yield higher rates than those carried out in September. The former month catches university graduates while they are waiting for the results of job and visa applications; by the latter date they have either found work in Lebanon or left the country.⁵⁰ There was a natural experiment that further proved the rule. Unemployment rates shot up from about twelve percent in 2001 to twenty-two percent in 2002.⁵¹ Tabbarah attributes this increase to restrictions on immigration from the Middle East to the West in the wake of the September 11 attacks. “All the people that were going to the States and Europe got stuck here,” he says.

Normal flows of outmigration thus help to prevent the emergence in Lebanon of a large population of unemployed persons of the kind who played a major role in street protests elsewhere in the Arab world in 2011. It relieves the country of those who might otherwise press greater demands upon the state for job creation, basic welfare services, or political accountability. Like outmigration, workers' remittances function as a safety valve allowing social and economic discontent to dissipate among those who remain in the home country. By increasing the purchasing power of hundreds of thousands of Lebanese, monetary transfers from loved ones abroad reduce demands on elites for accountability and reform. A historically weak state, as well as the experience of state collapse during the civil war, trained Lebanese society to manage with minimal government provision of public goods. Remittances have long helped to fill the gap—primarily as subsidies to individual families, but also as a source of investment in schools, charities, infrastructure, and houses of worship.⁵²

For some, remittances do not simply relieve economic pressure, but even enable a life of ease and luxury. A Lebanese blogger remarks that, due to the diaspora—which he dubs “Lebanon’s sugar daddy”—there are two kinds of employees in the country: those who do and do not receive remittances. His elaboration is telling:

The first kind is made of the people who are stuck in the rat race. They struggle to make ends meet and to save at the end of each month. They sometimes have two jobs. They are always angry at [*sic*] the government and are constantly complaining from low pay. Their ultimate goal is to find a rich spouse, a job in the Gulf or an immigration ticket to Canada.

The second kind is . . . people who net \$900 a month but drive \$70,000 cars. They work for pleasure, prestige, or for the pursuit of a sense of accomplishment and growth, but not to pay the bills. . . . Their pay-cheques are their disposable incomes, but the essentials (accommodation, utilities, transportation, cell-phone bills, health-insurance) are simply “taken care of.”

This stereotyping is of course just a caricature, but there is nothing that can symbolize the Lebanese economy better than that second category.⁵³

Numerous commentaries echo this idea that migration, matched only by war, is the main source of economic mobility in Lebanon. “Those who stay [in Lebanon] are either already rich or will never be financially stable until they leave,” a writer for the *Daily Star* observes.⁵⁴ In analyst Oussama Safa’s words, “If you see someone and he’s poor, you know he has no one outside. If you see someone and he’s rich, you know his kids are abroad.”⁵⁵ The upshot is a strange disconnect in Lebanon between salaries and income. According to Tabbarah, many people are socially middle class (in terms of standard of living and consumption patterns) even though they are economically lower class (in terms of wages).⁵⁶

A second and related mechanism connecting emigration to resilience of political structures and practices is emigration’s function in offering individuals a way of escaping a political status quo without having to transform it. To use Albert Hirschman’s terminology, outmigration extends an option of exit that reduces the urgency and the likelihood of voice.⁵⁷ This dynamic is well known in some Latin American cases, where emigration is believed to have contributed to the consolidation of regimes by exporting actual or potential opposition. Indeed, Jorge Domínguez argued that the United States occasionally justified harsh asylum policies toward Cuba and Nicaragua on the grounds that accepting dissidents would strengthen Castro and the Sandinistas, respectively.⁵⁸

This relationship finds further illustration in the case of Morocco, where the instigator of emigration has been not only unemployment, but also a political and economic structure that many regard as corrupt and exclusionary.⁵⁹ Exit from what appears to be a dead-end life in Morocco is so alluring that many attempt to sneak into Europe despite enormous risks and costs. In the early 1990s, one would-be migrant spent thousands of dollars to sail for days without food or water, only to be arrested upon arriving on the Spanish coast. On his decision to migrate, he said, “Death is better than misery.”⁶⁰ The dream of leaving lessens the imperative of working to relieve that misery. A Moroccan activist in Spain says, “The result of so much migration is that people stop thinking of any collective alternative. People only think about how to escape individually, while others simply do not care what happens to them.”⁶¹

Similar dynamics may occur in Lebanon at various stages of the migratory process. Even before people become emigrants, the expectation that

they will have the option of leaving in the future can lessen the felt need to invest in national politics, civil society, or campaigns for political reform. Prospective migration enables political apathy, especially for Lebanese whose economic and social positions give them strong prospects of obtaining visas abroad. In this context, Beirut-based journalist Nicholas Blanford explains, thousands of middle class families in Lebanon continually ponder migrating. He says, “Particularly since the 2006 war, people feel the situation is unstable, so they’re drawing up contingency plans. They’re saying, ‘If there is war, where will we go?’”⁶² Even if such migration is temporary, it is sufficient to reduce the perceived need for political change. “If we intended to stay, then maybe we would go into the streets,” architect Dina Barroud comments. “But we can leave, so we are very indifferent and apathetic.”⁶³ Nassib Ghobril, Byblos Bank’s remittances expert, agrees: “When there is aggravation in the country, the first thing people say is, ‘Let’s emigrate.’ They don’t say, ‘Let’s try to solve the problem.’”⁶⁴ An orientation toward exiting Lebanon thus comes at the expense of an orientation toward reforming it.

This relationship can be at play in the case of actual outmigration as it is in prospective migration. In his analysis of the “squeeze” on the Lebanese middle class, political scientist Chahine Ghais says, “Once you break through a certain ceiling of education and awareness, it’s hard to live a lesser life. When you have a high level of dissatisfaction, you have three options for dealing with it: you can break yourself; you can break the system; or you can leave.” The first option describes the situation of those who “extinguish the fire within themselves accept whatever position a *za’im* gets for them, basically get co-opted, and will never make a big difference.” The second option refers to those who stay committed to making a difference in their lives and in the system, even though “breaking the system is very difficult and the personal price is high.” Given the costs of these two options, Ghais concludes, “the overwhelming majority exit. In spite of their loyalty to nation, community, family, they go abroad. This is a source of suffering, but they can’t accept just some small job [and be satisfied in Lebanon].”⁶⁵

When Ghais himself left a comfortable position in the United States to return to Lebanon in 1988, many people told him that he was crazy. At the same time, many of his friends found work in the Gulf, where they accepted the disadvantages of living in a more socially conservative environment in exchange for the chance to fulfill their career and life ambitions. They now

return to Lebanon primarily for vacations; for them, the country has largely become a summer home. Ghais notes that these émigrés ask nothing from the Lebanese government and want nothing to do with Lebanese politics. “They come back for the sea, the food, memories, and extended family,” he explains. “They say, ‘To hell with the system,’ and establish their own parallel system at the individual level that is [an] exit from the system of Lebanon as a collective.”⁶⁶

In these ways, prospective and actual outmigration can serve as a kind of political exit that decreases the urgency of political voice. Likewise for those remaining behind, the receipt of remittances enables political disengagement. As described above, those whose basic financial needs are “taken care of” by family in the diaspora have the privilege of figuratively “exiting” the Lebanese political system and the constraints that politics puts on economic opportunity. In Ghobril’s words, “Money from abroad gives people the luxury of complaining about politics without doing much.”⁶⁷ In his view, migration contributes to a “culture of complaint,” whose corollary is minimal involvement in efforts to take action to reform the system.

The evidence presented thus far is not sufficient to prove the function of emigration as political exit. In order to prove this function, more data is needed to demonstrate the existence of the will, opportunity, and capacity to mount a challenge to the status quo in Lebanon, and also to demonstrate how the outflow of persons or inflow of remittances systematically undermines this development. Nevertheless, this discussion draws out the logic of this effect of migration and shows its resonance in the perspectives of Lebanese citizens and residents. Their testimonies speak of a public mood very different than that of explosive frustration that drove mass protest in other Arab countries in 2011. Had emigration not helped to produce that mood, Lebanon might have also have experienced strong popular pressures on the government.

A third way that emigration might buttress the political status quo is by depleting the ranks of those well-positioned to bring new ideas and skills into public life. The Moroccan case is again instructive in this regard, as many who emigrate are young, highly skilled, and ambitious. According to one poll, ninety percent of Moroccans between the ages of twenty and twenty-nine wanted to settle abroad. Of university graduates, seventy percent wanted to migrate.⁶⁸ Shana Cohen argues that the allure of emigration has

helped to transform educated and professional Moroccans into a “global middle class” that looks to satisfy its aspirations abroad and has largely given up on its own nation-state.⁶⁹

Lebanon manifests similar patterns. Across time and space, young people have often been at the forefront of popular and revolutionary movements. The fact that Lebanon’s young people are increasingly likely to emigrate, however, takes away from the prospects for political transformation inside the country’s borders.⁷⁰ Economist Boutros Labaki observes:

As it was the case during the Ottoman period, since independence, emigration tends to lower the number and force of young potential challengers of the political establishment. . . . For these people, migration represents a chance for social promotion, but is also a kind of exile for new potential elites able to conduct processes of social and political change.⁷¹

“Brain drain” compounds this effect. Changes in the global economy and the provision of visas to Europe and North America have increased migration opportunities for those who have university degrees or technical skills vis-à-vis those who do not. One implication of educated and professional migration is that it lures away from the developing world those who are most likely to be institution-builders.⁷² “Brain drain” forewarns of stagnation in the prospects for structural change.

Available data indicates a basis for such dynamics in the Lebanese case. Kasparian finds that more than fifty percent of contemporary emigrants were “workers” when they departed Lebanon, compared to fifteen percent in “educated” professions.⁷³ Nonetheless, the migration rate among those with secondary or university education has increased at a striking rate. About thirty-nine percent of Lebanese emigrating since 1992 were university-educated, compared to twenty-five percent of those who migrated from 1975-2001 and twenty percent of current residents.⁷⁴ The education gap between migrants and residents is even higher among youth. Since 1992, forty-three percent of those who emigrated between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five had university degrees, compared to nineteen percent of this age group resident in Lebanon.⁷⁵

Lebanese commentators frequently cite such figures in order to lament what emigration indicates for their country's future. As Guita Hourani and Eugene Sensenig-Dabbous write, "Those Lebanese who might serve as the foundation for the recovery of the economy, reform of the political system, restoration of the infrastructure, and creation of a culture of accountability and merit-based achievement are the ones most likely to leave or to stay away."⁷⁶ A study by researchers from the American University of Beirut arrives at a similar conclusion. "We are forcing our skilled talents to leave because of the deteriorated political situation and the corrupted system presiding over our country," they write. "Therefore, change will not come from inside under the current circumstances."⁷⁷

Educated, middle-class youth are not necessarily any society's engine of democratic change. The recent uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa remind us that the agents of movements for reform or revolution can be unpredictable. In Egypt, many credit professional, Internet-connected youth for playing a key role in organizing the 25 January 2011 protests, kick starting the revolt that forced the resignation of Husni Mubarak. In Tunisia, however, it was spontaneous street protests by poor residents of the rural periphery that gave the uprising its initial thrust, after which union activists critically intervened to sustain and spread the revolutionary momentum. We cannot know if, confined to Lebanon, young professionals would be agents of change, or if that impetus would come instead from other quarters.

Nonetheless, it is significant that reform-minded Lebanese repeatedly voice concern that brain drain also drains prospects for resolving endemic political and administrative problems. And they voice another worry: when many of the most talented and highly trained young people are the ones most likely to leave, who is left behind? Rindala 'Abd al-Baki, a teacher and researcher on youth in Lebanon, notes that young people who stay in Lebanon tend to struggle between jobs, with little time to think about politics. Alternatively, they are jobless, which means they are the most desperate to accept any sort of employment or favor offered by a *za'im* or political party. In the latter case, they are positioned to become dependent on existent power brokers and act as followers defending established interests rather than innovators and challengers to the system.⁷⁸ A twenty-six-year old

Lebanese woman who watched nearly all of her friends migrate expressed this dilemma. “If we all leave, who will be left to take care of the country?” she asked. “The people ruling it now obviously are not doing a good job.”⁷⁹

A fourth and final mechanism connecting emigration to political resilience is the financial resources that migrants or return migrants inject into the political system. Though there is no firm data on diasporic contributions to Lebanese political parties, these funds are believed to be significant. Seeking such contributions, major parties have established networks, news outlets, or organizational branches abroad, from South America to Australia to West Africa. Lebanese politicians also pay frequent visits to their supporters around the globe, where they participate in meetings, conferences, dinners, and fundraising events.⁸⁰ It is important to note that Lebanese expatriates also make considerable donations to charitable causes, local development in their home villages, and, increasingly, political activism on the basis of inclusive issues rather than identity politics.⁸¹ More research is needed to validate what is typically assumed: that diasporic involvement in homeland political activity serves to reinforce the formidable machines of existent partisan organizations and power brokers more than it undermines their domination of the political landscape.

A different way that diaspora monies have seemed to reinforce the existent structure and practice of politics is the recurrent pattern by which migrants find success abroad, return to Lebanon, and seek to consecrate their wealth by obtaining public office. Political office offers legitimacy, particularly for those who make their fortunes in questionable circumstances or come from modest backgrounds and hope to break through the hierarchy of traditional elite families. Between independence in 1943 and the start of the civil war in 1975, ten returned émigrés held cabinet seats. From 1992 to 2005, an average of fifteen percent of deputies had some migration experience.⁸² Some particularly successful émigrés succeeded in using their wealth to reach the crowning heights of Lebanese politics. Husayn al-‘Uweini, an émigré who became a millionaire in Saudi Arabia and returned to become prime minister in 1951, established a tradition. Rafiq al-Hariri took it to new heights in the 1990s. He was born to a modest family, became a billionaire tycoon in the Gulf, and emerged as the largest figure in Lebanon through far-reaching philanthropy, a close personal relationship with the Saudi royal family, and a key role in negotiating the accord

that ended the civil war. Other multi-millionaire émigrés have followed or attempted to follow a similar path, among them ‘Isam Faris, Muhammad Safadi, and Fu’ad Makhzumi. At the same time, countless other migrants have become involved in politics at the local level. Every region of Lebanon boasts expatriates who retained links to their hometowns and built good reputations there by making charitable contributions to local causes. Many went on to become elected mayors. Others do not serve in public office but have become local power brokers, whose support or denial of support for other candidates crucially affects the latter’s prospects.

In pursuing political power or local influence, many—though certainly not all—returned émigrés become engaged in conventional politics and thus become part of the perpetuation of the Lebanese system as a whole. Traboulsi argues that the patronage system of landed elites began to collapse during the first half of the century because it no longer had the resources to meet people’s needs.⁸³ Historically, such crises in traditional patterns of social control instigated the development of political parties and social movements that pushed for reform. In Lebanon, however, traditional *zu’ama* had the option of offering wealthy returned migrants a place on their parliamentary electoral lists in exchange for financial support. The rich (and emigration was the principal way to get rich quickly) could literally buy their entry into politics and become independent politicians in their own right. Thus, when old landed patron-client relationships faltered, migratory processes enabled the formation of new patron-client networks. The conclusion, Traboulsi suggests, is that migrant wealth “has been corrupting political life since the 1930s,” and that, even today, emigration allows “someone to impose himself on political life in Lebanon.”⁸⁴

Conclusion

It has perhaps never been more pressing to understand the sources of resilience and change in the political systems of Arab countries. Scholars often attribute the persistence of political regimes to the strategies that leaders use to sustain their grip on power and thwart opposition movements. Taking a different approach, this article is a preliminary inquiry into emigration as an overlooked contributing factor to this persistence in Lebanon.

Despite recurrent crises and popular discontent, the political system in Lebanon remains largely resistant to change. In the words of analyst Jawad

Adra, the composite pieces of the sectarian/clientelist political system fall into place such that the system functions as flawlessly and indestructibly as a Swiss watch.⁸⁵ Still, those who explain resilience with reference only to those constituent parts overlook the fact that the system operates only to the degree that income from external sources sustain state, society, and economy. Emigration, in alleviating unemployment and generating millions of dollars in remittances, is a crucial source of such income.

In addition to providing essential monies, this article proposes that emigration reinforces the Lebanese political status quo through four mechanisms. It can serve as a “safety valve” that prevents Lebanon’s residents from reaching the level of socioeconomic distress that the poor state of the economy, political accountability, and public goods provision might otherwise induce. Relatedly, emigration offers an “exit option” that reduces the imperative of working for political reform. It also leads to depletion of the ranks of those best positioned to bring new ideas and skills into public life. Finally, it might fortify clientelism by inviting a continual infusion of migrant wealth into politics.

This analysis contributes to broadening debates on both the persistence of political systems and the ramifications of outmigration. It explores a puzzle of broad theoretical and comparative importance, proposes causal relationships, systematically teases out their logic, and employs a variety of primary and secondary sources to illustrate how these logics function in the Lebanese case. Nonetheless, more evidence is needed to validate fully the propositions that this article has introduced. Future research can continue collecting and analyzing such data. It can also explore the degree to which these patterns apply to other countries.

As a small foray in that direction, it can be useful to compare Lebanon to other states in the Middle East and North Africa and in particular to those that underwent dramatic uprisings and political transformations in 2011, such as Tunisia and Egypt. Any comparison must proceed with caution, as many factors that contributed to popular rebellions in those countries were not present in Lebanon. Tunisia and Egypt were ruled by authoritarian regimes in which a single party dominated the political landscape and an aging president stayed in office for decades by manipulating elections, co-opting elites, and repressing dissent. Economic grievances were accentuated by neoliberal economic reforms that increased inequality and corruption, provocatively conspicuous in the enrichment of the president’s family and

close associates. The situation in Lebanon is distinct. In its confessional political system, government power is more decentralized among parties and political competition more meaningful.

Given these differences, any assessment of the political ramifications of emigration in Lebanon, Tunisia, and Egypt requires a strategy of data collection very different than that on which this article is based. For now, it is simply telling that the extent of emigration is much greater in the Lebanese case. According to the World Bank, Lebanon ranks first in the region in terms of tertiary-educated emigration; 39.6 percent of the tertiary-educated population in Lebanon emigrated, compared to 12.5 percent in Tunisia. Egypt, registering less than half that amount, did not place among the region's top ten.⁸⁶ Such emigration has contributed to lower rates of unemployment; according to figures from 2004-05, youth unemployment was 20.9 percent in Lebanon, compared to 30.7 percent in Tunisia and 34.1 percent in Egypt.⁸⁷ Lebanon ranked first among the region's remittance receivers in absolute terms, remarkable given its small size. In 2010, Lebanon received 8.2 billion US dollars in remittances, compared to Egypt's 7.7 billion US dollars and Tunisia's two billion US dollars. Lebanon also ranked first among the region for remittances as a portion of GDP. In 2009, remittances accounted for 22.4 percent of GDP in Lebanon, compared to 5.3 percent in Tunisia and four percent in Egypt.⁸⁸

Of course, these trends alone in no way explain the occurrence of popular revolts in Tunisia and Egypt or their absence in Lebanon. More research on these two North African cases is necessary to establish the degree to which the proposed connections between emigration and politics in Lebanon were in effect there and what role, if any, those mechanisms played in either the resilience of the authoritarian regimes or the popular revolts that rose up to challenge them. In elaborating four mechanisms in the Lebanese case, this paper offers a possible template of dynamics to which analysts can be attentive in other cases. Others who extend this query to other countries can also undertake to identify whether the proposed relationships take on different dimensions or consequences in social and political contexts distinct from the Lebanese one. Such research can offer new insight into the informal mechanisms shaping and perpetuating politics in Arab world. It will also reveal some of the myriad ways in which migrations and diasporas affect the countries that migrants leave behind.

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