"Under the Lebanese flag": National Unity in the Movement of October 17th

Rakickaja, Marija

Articles

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„Su Libano vėliava": nacionalinės vienybės samprata Spalio 17-osios judėjime

Marija Rakickaja marija.rakickaja@gmail.com
Vilniaus universiteto

Abstract: This article aims to understand how national unity is being constructed in the context of the protest movement, started on October 17, 2019 in Lebanon, what it is grounded on and what is the role of the elite in the process. The study is based on an ethnographic study conducted in Beirut between October 17 and December 19, 2019 and analyzes the movement of October 17th as an instance of nation-building from below.

It became clear that a unity across different communities has emerged from below and reached a "tipping point" coinciding with the movement of October 17th, which provided new spaces for people to engage in "viral peer-to-peer networking," creating a "feedback loop" reinforcing unity based on shared grievances and the idea of a civil state. It is argued that the elite are not necessary for a national sentiment to emerge. Its durability is though assumed to be related to efficacy and thus possibly impacted by leadership.

Keywords: Lebanon, nationalism, social movements, sectarianism, confessionalism.

Summary: Šis straipsnis siekia išsiaiškinti, kaip 2019 m. spalio 17 d. Libane prasidėjusiame protesto judėjime buvo kuriama nacionalinė vienybė, kuo ji grindžiama ir koks elito vaidmuo šiame procese. Straipsnis, paremtas etnografiniu tyrimu, atliktu Beirute tarp 2019 m. spalio 17 d. ir gruodžio 19 d., analizuoja Libano spalio 17-osios judėjimą iš tautos kūrimo iš apačios perspektyvos. Išaiškėjo, kad skirtingų bendruomenių vienybė atsirado iš apačios ir pasiekė lūžio tašką, sutampantį su Spalio 17-osios judėjimu, kuris atvėrė naujas erdves žmonėms kurti tinklus, skleisti ir taip stiprinti vienybės idėją, pagrįstą bendromis negandomis ir pilietinės valstybės vizija. Daroma išvada, kad elitas nebūtinas nacionalinei vienybei atsirasti, tačiau jos išlaikymas siejamas su efektyvumu, kuriam įtakos gali turėti lyderystės problema.

Keywords: Libanas, nacionalizmas, socialiniai judėjimai, sektarianizmas, konfesionalizmas.

Introduction

On October 17, 2019, a nationwide protest movement started in Lebanon. It began with a group of activists taking to the streets of Beirut, but the wave quickly spread across the country. The tension had been growing for a while due to a worsening economic crisis, the government's plans to increase certain taxes and the shortage of dollars in circulation. In addition to that, extensive wildfires broke out on October 15, which in 48 hours destroyed double as much forest as is lost on an average year. Lebanon received aid from abroad, while the local government proved unequipped to solve the issue. The three firefighting helicopters

previously donated to the country were never employed because no funding was allocated for their maintenance. All of this, along with long-lasting problems of inequality, corruption, electricity outages and other issues, infuriated the population. The final drop was the government's decision to tax Voice Over Internet Protocol calls, which are calls made via applications such as Whatsapp and Messenger, taken on October 17. Whatsapp being the most popular platform for VoIP in Lebanon, some labeled the movement a "Whatsapp revolution," which was widely criticized as the protests were concerned with much broader issues. Indeed, the VoIP tax was canceled the same night, but it did not stop the movement. Likewise, the protests went on after the prime minister at the time, Saad Hariri, presented a reform plan and after his resignation on October 29. The protesters did not trust the ability of the system in place to resolve their grievances. They demanded a change of the regime, an independent government to arrange new elections and reform the sectarian system [1] . One of the distinguishing traits of the movement, at least at its beginning, was the broad participation across different social classes, sects and regions, and lack of coordination by any political party or other organizations.

From the regional perspective the protest movement in question can first of all be related to the Arab Spring, as illustrated by one of its slogans borrowed from the latter: "The people want to bring down the regime" (*Ash-sha#b yurīd isqā# an-ni#ām*). The events share many similarities when it comes to their reasons and goals. They can also be attributed a certain transformational role. Mojtaba Mahdavi argues that the Arab Spring brought about a new discourse "introduced by ordinary people" in the form of post-Islamism [2] . Dalia Fahmy and Eid Mohamed suggest that the Arab Spring was "excavating new metaphors" transcending nationalism seen as colonial legacy [3] . The idea of a new discourse brought about by "ordinary people" is seen as highly relevant for the movement analyzed here as well. The discussion on Islam, however, cannot be directly translated to the Lebanese case due to its religious demographics. Meanwhile, the new discourse is seen as actually building on national sentiment rather than moving away from it.

There had been other movements mobilizing people across different sections of Lebanese society. One such movement was the Cedar Revolution of 2005 calling for the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon. Tamirace Fakhoury Muehlbacher asserts that despite the movement's failure to entrench "a new Lebanese national ethos," which seemed to have been emerging, it "left an aftertaste of a new collective consciousness." [4] Similarly, the wave of the Arab Spring of 2011 reached the streets of Beirut and soon lost its momentum, leaving behind what Bassel F. Salloukh calls a "symbolic challenge to the hegemony of the sectarian system." [5] Finally, in 2015 the biggest protests since 2005 erupted due to a garbage crisis. Once again, the movement did not bring substantial results but left something behind; among other things, a slogan which came back to the streets in 2019 "Everyone means everyone"

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or "All of them means all of them" (*Killun ya'ni killun*), meaning the rejection of all the ruling class [6].

All of these movements opened up a dialogue across the different sections of the society and brought about hope for national unity. Similarly, when the protests broke out in 2019, not only the economic grievances were in focus, but a strong narrative of unity and a possibility for reconciliation between different communities from below emerged. Besides, this movement gained an unprecedented scope and scale, especially through broad participation across the country and not just Beirut. It was frequently emphasized that people from all the sects, classes and regions stood together and that the Lebanese flag was the only symbol carried by the protesters [7]. In November 2019, Salloukh argued that "The October 17 revolution marks the definitive end of the civil war and a genuine bottom-up reconciliation between one-time warring communities" and called the events "the birth of a new 'imagined community,' one that travels across regions, classes, genders, and sects." [8] A similar sentiment was shared by many.

Thus, the objective of this paper is to grasp this sense of a newly emerging national unity, to explore the ways in which it was being constructed, and to examine its basis and the role of the elites in the process.

1. Nation-building: between the masses and the elite

Before proceeding any further, the nature of the events analyzed here needs to be addressed, as they were called a revolution by some and a social movement by others [9]. The distinction between the two terms is not always crystal clear. Considered to be totally different phenomena in the twentieth century, the concepts came to overlap with the so-called "colored revolutions" of the twenty-first century. However, while the contemporary strategies of revolutions and social movements might be similar, the revolutions tend to be "more transformative." [10] Rene Rojas and Jeff Goodwin suggest that revolution can broadly be defined as "any extralegal overthrow and transformation of a political regime or state by a popular rebellion, whether by violent or nonviolent means." [11] While the aspirations of the movement in question were revolutionary, it is evident that the actual regime change has not occurred. Thus, the events analyzed here are treated as a social movement, understood as defined by David A. Snow: "collective actions through which aggrieved collectivities give voice publicly to various grievances and press relevant authorities to attend to the associated claims and/or demands." [12] As for the forms such movements can take, the repertoire is really broad: from spontaneous protests and violent uprisings to organized peaceful marches and demonstrations or spreading protest messages via social media and more. [13] This allows looking at the movement as an ongoing phenomenon going through different stages, as while the mass protest stage analyzed

here might have lost its momentum, other forms of action related to the movement of October 17th can still be encountered.

The movement of October 17th is analyzed here in terms of national unity emerging from below, that is, it can be seen as an instance of nation-building, bringing about a certain form of nationalism. However, according to Thomas Hylland Eriksen, the nation comes into existence when an influential group decides upon it. [14] Similarly, many approaches to nationalism accept the "Gellnerian" point of view, wherein it is the elites that mobilize the masses, with nationalism as a result of this process. [15] Joseph M. Whitmeyer contests this point of view and provides examples of failed nationalism to show that elites are insufficient for its establishing. [16] The examples are not always convincing due to lack of context, but the idea itself seems relevant, although it is not really challenging the dominant ideologies. The success of nationalism promoted by elites is not unconditional; Eriksen maintains as well that the success of ideology depends on the political effectiveness and support of the masses. [17] Whitmeyer also argues that the elite does not construct nationalism but allows for a perhaps latent nationalist sentiment to express itself, and maintains that the elites "can and do shape its expression in a variety of ways." [18] However, while this can be the case, I would not agree that the elites always shape this expression, as demonstrated by the Lebanese case. At the same time, the argument that the elites cannot construct nationalism in certain cases does not seem entirely grounded.

Eric Kaufmann does not reject the notion that elites play a crucial role in constructing nations in some cases but emphasizes the importance of horizontal or peer-to-peer national dynamics. He suggests looking at it through the framework of complexity theory, based on emergence, feedback loops, tipping points and distributed knowledge, or "the wisdom of crowds." The emergency of national sentiment is explained in terms of everyday nationalism working through peer-to-peer interactions, "unconscious behaviors" like "attending particular churches or hiring employees from one's social network." [19] The tipping point and feedback loops ensure the spread of an ideology, which Kaufman compares to an epidemic: "the more who become attached to an idea, the more vectors for its spread, until a tipping point is reached" in a process of "'viral' peer-to-peer networking." [20] Distributed knowledge is for Kaufman like a market economy, which is more effective in reaching each individual's needs than a centralized one. Similarly, bottom-up nationalism is for him more accommodating to various personal or local nationalisms. In such way the bottom-up version of nationalism is seen as more effective or "viral" than a top-down one. Kaufman argues that "[u]nity emerges from a chaotic diversity with the common idiom of nationhood," while if different identity projects are promoted "without reference to the nation," no unity can emerge. [21] In this point of view, referring to the nation might be strengthening the national sentiment in itself, regardless

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of different visions attached to this sentiment. It is interesting to consider how Kaufman's suggestions apply to the Lebanese case examined here.

Before accepting the suggestion that bottom-up nationalism can be uniting despite being diverse, it is worth to consider what were the actual unifiers within the movement of October 17th and how they related to nationalism. The notion of civic nationalism can be useful for that matter. The nation is then viewed primarily as a political and territorial community, constructed by its citizens, wherein the highest form of allegiance is, as put by Anthony D. Smith, "of the citizen to his or her nation-state." [22] Focusing on civic nationalism doesn't mean rejecting ethnic nationalism, as political or civic nationalism usually turns out to be ethnic and linguistic at the same time. [23] The term "civic nationalism" is seen as relevant as it emphasizes the relationship between the state and its citizens and loyalties based on this relationship as opposed to other loyalties.

In terms of ethnic nationalism, ethnicity itself poses certain problems. Eriksen notes that ethnicity is dynamic and possible to manipulate, and that defining it as "shared culture" is problematic, as the same people can share different cultural traits with different groups. He demonstrates how in Mauritius, for instance, Muslims, Hindus and Chinese are considered ethnic groups on a clearly different basis. [24] Similarly, in Lebanon the question of ethnicity is complex, for the sects here carry multiple meanings, including ethnic connotations (see p. 11–12). Thus, the dichotomy between the civic and ethnic nationalisms could be relevant if we assign the role of ethnic nationalisms in Lebanon to the ideologies raising each sectarian category above all others. On the other hand, it is argued that the new civic nationalism is not detached from ethnic nationalism. The main collision might then lie not in the question of cultural traits, but once again, in the main object of loyalty for the citizens. It is in any case assumed that both drivers of civic and ethnic nationalisms are at play and trying to grasp those drivers may help to better understand the process.

An important role for the nation-building process is played by national symbols. Kaufman suggests that flags and proper names to national ideology have "a similar aggregating role to prices in a marketplace." [25] Pål Kolstø claims that national symbols, such as flags, anthems and alike, can work both as uniting and dividing powers depending on how and by whom they are used. He also points out that, besides promoting and displaying the symbols in itself, an important "psychological mechanism" based on Pavlov's "law of association" plays a role by linking positive feelings to the symbols through situations associated "with pride, joy, and high spirits." [26] It is worth to keep this in mind and look at how the national symbols are used and what they mean within the movement.

The article examines the ways people unite within the movement of October 17th and aims to explore how national unity is being constructed through people's interactions, what it is based on, what role is played by the elite and how national symbols are employed in the process.

2. Methodology

This paper is based on an ethnographic study consisting of participant observation and 33 semi-structured interviews with the participants of the demonstrations in Beirut conducted between October 17 and December 18, 2019. The participant observation was carried out primarily in Downtown Beirut, where most of the demonstrations were taking place, but also in other parts of the city where some actions could be observed or comments gathered. Most of the interviews were recorded and transcribed, except when informants refused to do so and the conversations were written down. One interview was conducted with two informants at a time, the rest as one-on-one conversations. Certain questions were recurring throughout the interviews (such as the motivation for participation in the demonstrations, relation to the narrative of unity, experiences of segregation, etc.), others appeared in response to new developments or current discussions.

While analyzing the data, the informants' age, gender, religious affiliation, occupation, and other background information was taken into regard. The majority of the informants were male, which depends on the higher presence of male participants on the site, especially when the scale of actions had receded (particularly during the working days, since approximately the beginning of November, although the intensity of actions varied through time). The largest age group among the informants is under 35 years with only one informant above 40 and two above 50 and 60, respectively. The majority of the informants were contacted on the site of the demonstrations directly and 2 of them through recommendations. More information is provided in the appendix.

During the research certain ethical aspects were considered. It was highly important to secure the informants' anonymity, confidentiality and data safety, especially keeping in mind that the informants could feel vulnerable because of possible reactions from their surroundings, opponents of the movement, or security forces. My own effect on the field was also considered both while analyzing the data and communicating with the informants. Appearance, gender, and foreign origin associated with the West may have at times pushed the informants to modify their positions. It was therefore crucial to very clearly communicate my goals and positions. This was also important in order to avoid any misunderstandings and to not create false expectations for instance, by making clear that I am not a journalist who would be able to "make the world hear one's story."

Finally, the aspect of safety and security was necessary to consider. This was largely done through gathering information and constantly keeping track of events through social media and other available means. Additionally, as Stefan Malthaner suggests, it is the "good knowledge of the field and, in particular, good field relations and local support networks" that is the most important for researchers' safety. [27] In accordance with this, the confidence in my own safety was enhanced

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by familiarity with the physical surroundings and ties made with those regularly present at the sites.

The research process was complicated by limited language skills (interviews were conducted in English, while only some shorter conversations happened in Arabic). The language barrier was partially tackled with some help from the locals, who assisted with translation when needed. However, this limitation could have impacted the scope of informants in terms of education and perhaps age.

A few comments on the choice of the methodology should be made. Philip Balsiger and Alexandre Lambelet maintain that participant observation is not that common when it comes to studies of social movements but can nevertheless contribute to the research of such movements in multiple ways. Two of the ways described by them are especially relevant here, which are "breaking down the illusion of homogeneity" and "revealing gaps between ideology and practices." [28] In such a way, participant observation can at times be helpful in locating possible discrepancies between the informants' statements and actions. Furthermore, the chosen methods seem suitable in order to critically examine the narrative of unity surrounding the movement. A close-up picture may enhance the understanding of how this narrative actually translated among the protesters before accepting it for a fact and moving on to, for instance, discussing external factors as possible obstacles.

3. Sociopolitical and historical implications for national unity in Lebanon

First of all, it is important to consider the sociopolitical and historical context making the question of national unity in Lebanon both relevant and complicated. Although the vast majority of Lebanon's population is considered to be Arabs, the main criteria for ethnic differentiation here is religion. There are 18 officially recognized religious sects in Lebanon, none of which constitute a clear majority. The biggest confessional groups are Muslims and Christian Maronites. [29] Exact statistical information on religious distribution is virtually impossible to acquire, given that the latest official census in Lebanon was conducted in 1932. Based on independent regional research from 2018, the Muslim Shi'a constitute 31.6%, Muslim Sunni 31.2% and Christians (Maronites and smaller confessions combined) 30.6% of the population. [30] A small but influential confessional group, the Druze, constitute about 5.2% of the population. [31] The religious demographics are especially important due to the fact that the Lebanese political system is based on confessionalism, or a kind of consociationalism, where political representation is instructed by religious distribution within the population. [32] According to the confessional power-sharing agreement introduced with the 1926 Constitution and reinstated in The National Pact of 1943 and the Ta'if Accord of 1989, the presidential post is reserved for a Maronite, the Prime

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minister must be a Sunni, and the speaker of parliament a Shi'a, while other posts are distributed among all the sects proportionally. [33]

In order to understand the challenges brought about by this system, the concept of sectarianism needs to be discussed. While the notion of confessionalism, used to describe the power-sharing principle, is neutral, sectarianism entails principle along with ideology and social structure produced by it. The term is a translation of the Arabic *#a'ifiya*, which according to Mark Farha, "carries a particularly negative power" in Lebanon, having originated from the context of confessional strife. [34] Definitions of the term vary among scholars. Some have attempted to limit its meaning to "a marker of social rank" undermining the religious connotations. [35] Others have been comparing *#a'ifiya* to a kind of religious caste resembling the Indian notion. [36] De-emphasizing religious identity is, according to Farha, problematic, as the term was used to refer to particular sects already in the seventeenth century, while the comparison to the Indian casts entails an overly rigid socioeconomic hierarchy. Nevertheless, the latter does capture the term's multiple layers of meaning, in particular, its social and sectarian dimensions. [37] Salloukh explains sectarianism as "politicization of religious identities," linking it to raising the interests of one confessional community above others, confessional segregation, and clientelism. According to him, sectarianism is also affecting the ideological imagination, "producing sectarian subjects" unable to reach a consensus regarding the question of "what does Lebanon mean?" [38]

Similarly, the Lebanese sects, or *#awa'if*, carry with them multiple layers of meaning. As Farha puts it, *#awa'if* entail "at once communal connotations, religious identities and politico-economic interests". They can also be thought of in terms of communities constituting "'clientelistic interest groups', *Klientelgruppen*, represented by political bosses." [39] Thus, in the sectarian system, the sects' multiple meanings and functions mirror the functions of the sectarian leaders, who, among other things, play the role of patrons to their respective clientelistic groups. This system can be seen as creating divisions within the society, overlapping with, but based on more than religious affiliation. This order is maintained through the institutional system.

An important role is played by the personal status laws which are based on religious affiliation, meaning that all the matters concerning marriage, custody, inheritance and alike are to be addressed according to the rules set by one's sect and not by the constitution. As Salloukh puts it, the Lebanese are divided and besieged "in a web of sectarian legal procedures from birth to death, each locked into her or his communal group." [40] Farha addresses this as a certain contradiction, as although the Lebanese constitution overall is considered secular, personal status laws are exempted from it; thus, Farha argues that religion and state are separated by giving "maximum amount of jurisdiction over personal status laws and education to the sects." He maintains that this

threatens "to spur confessional subnationalities within schools, mosques and churches." [41] Thus, national unity may be challenged.

Historically speaking, the problem of a unified national idea and divisions somewhat overlapping with confessional lines is not new in Lebanon. Carol Hakim argues that "coherent nationalist claims" of Lebanese nationalists were first formulated few months before the establishment of the state. [42] According to him, Lebanism was originally not universally opposed to, but overlapped with Ottomanism and Syrianism. After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, these ideas turned into competing "claims for the independence of a Greater Lebanon, a Greater Syria, or an Arab Empire," which were "forcibly settled by France." [43] Kamal Salibi asserts that in the newly established state, two opposed ideas, Lebanism, embracing it, and Arabism, rooting for a broader unity of the Arabs, clashed and largely overlapped with religious differences. The former was supported by mainly Christian Maronites, influenced by France, and the latter mainly by Muslims, influenced by other Arabs. [44]

Hakim traces the origin of Lebanism to the mid-nineteenth century and the interactions between the French and the Christian Maronites of Mount Lebanon in pursuit of a "a vague political project" of "establishing a Christian entity in the Levant under French aegis." [45] In the same vein, Ussama Makdisi traces the problem of "the sect or *ṭa'ifa*" becoming "the quasi-nation defined against other *ṭa'ifas*" in general to the nineteenth century, when the Lebanese elites were using religion as an argument in order to secure European support. [46] The same tendency prevailed in the twentieth century, when the current power-sharing principle was introduced. There are some differences in opinions regarding the origins of the confessional articles in the constitution of 1926 as to them being mainly imposed by France, as proposed by Makdisi or aimed, at least to some extent, "to recognize local identities," as suggested by Farha. [47] Regardless of this argument, there does exist a consensus that the confessional categories have been instrumentalized by both local and foreign elites in order to secure their influence, which lead to the divisions prevailing to this day.

The divisions were further entrenched during the Civil War of 1975–1990 through what Fawwaz Traboulsi calls "a new configuration of space." The state was *de facto* ruled by the militias that divided the country into cantons and "cleansed their territories" creating "religiously homogeneous enclaves." [48] At the same time, political opponents, as well as "foreigners" and "intruders" (mainly Palestinians), were expelled. As Traboulsi puts it, "a new demographic equilibrium by double means of death and emigration" was created. [49] He calls this process a "memoricide," meaning that the memories of common mutual ties and interests were forcibly replaced by a "discourse of 'protection': the other wants to kill you, but we are here to save your lives." [50] Thus, the divisions hardened considerably. Additionally, while the civil war was still ongoing, Kamal Salibi wrote about different versions of history taught in Lebanese

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schools and observed that the continuing civil war in Lebanon was "a war to determine the correct history of the country."[51] This problem persists to this day, due to a lack of agreement about a common history of the civil war itself and a certain "state-sponsored amnesia,"[52] which can be seen as a continuation of Traboulsi's "memoricide."

It may be noted that certain political parties did raise the question of abolishing the power-sharing system based on confessionalism in the second part of the twentieth century. However, as Salibi argues, the actual goal of raising this question was decreasing the power of the Maronites, who benefited from the system, and the calls for secularization "were themselves highly confessional, especially when they were articulated by traditional leaderships which fed on confessional group feelings among members of their respective sects."[53]

The postwar period began with the Ta'if agreement of 1989, which reinstated the power-sharing system as a temporary solution without setting any date or procedure for the transition from it. Besides, the sectarian and political elites were supposed to be the ones who both maintained the system and reformed it.[54] This led to "cementing" rather than resolving sectarian divisions. The elites have not been interested in strengthening the state, rather, on the contrary, maintaining a divided "weak state" has been beneficial for them.[55]

Besides internal divisions among the local elites, the postwar period was characterized by the Syrian presence (1990–2005) allowed by the Ta'if accord.[56] All the areas of sociopolitical life became subject to Syrian influence; thus, any integration or effective power-sharing was hardly possible.[57] The Syrian departure in 2005 left a power vacuum, while the main political players engaged in a battle for influential positions. The politicians divided themselves into two camps, anti-Syrian and pro-Syrian: the Sunni-dominated 14 March alliance and the Shi'a-dominated 8 March opposition, respectively.[58] As Barakat, al-Habbal and Salloukh explain it, Lebanon went from Maronite-dominated to Muslim-dominated under the Syrian influence and to "a fierce Sunni-Shi'a power struggle over control of the post-Syrian Lebanese state."[59]

As we can see, the reconciliation among the Lebanese seems to never have been reached and no real efforts towards it were made by the political elite. It is against this background that the longing for building a national unity from below is being brought up in the context of social movements.

4. Findings

4.1. Perceived divisions and unity

First of all, it is worth to discuss if the assumed divisions along confessional lines are actually perceived as such by the informants. It has become clear that such divisions are indeed relevant, but the extent to which they affect the informants varies. Those who present themselves

as atheists or simply not religious tend to see others as divided, but not themselves. Likewise, the informants whose parents come from different religious backgrounds tend to see others as divided by religion and themselves as open. It is also evident that religion intersects with politics, and having certain political views at times blends with religious categories. For instance, a 24-year-old man, whose father is Shi'a and mother Sunni, explains:

For me the religious identity is not important since childhood, my parents are in sports, they don't care about these things. But even now some friends follow politicians. It's put in your head from childhood. (Ali, 24)

Thus, "following politicians" is related to one's religious identity.

Some other informants talk about more intensive experiences of divisions, as shared by an 18-year-old female student (Sunni):

Yeah, yeah, it's everywhere. It's in the way we talk, names we give each other, how we choose our sexual partners. Like, my parents won't let me marry a Christian or a girl. The regions are different. For example, the villages are more Christian, the cities more Islamic. You realize it in everything, restaurants, everything. (Dina, 18)

In the example above, marrying a person of a different religion would be as difficult for the informant's parents to accept as their daughter's sexual orientation. Perhaps belonging to the LGBTQ community in itself has strengthened the feelings of alienation, which is mirrored by the answers of another unrelated informant. This example also touches upon another recurring aspect, namely geographical divisions. As different cities or parts of them are often dominated by one religious community, to some extent, as a result of the aforementioned cleansing during the civil war, the divisions are often related to geographical categories. By asking where one is from, for instance, the people can place each other in different communities and adjust the relations between themselves accordingly. Sometimes the divisions are particularly visible when shown around in the southern part of Beirut, I was pointed to two areas, one just on the other side of the road from the other one of them Christian and wealthy, the other Shi'a and poor. "Capitalist and proletariat," as jokingly commented on by my guide, a Sunni student, who also explained that people of other religions are not allowed to buy property in the respective areas. This is an example of how religious segregation intersects with economic and geographic divisive lines.

Another aspect impacting the divisions is belonging to different generations. The majority of informants (as of the participants of the movement overall) are quite young and seem to feel that there is less division among younger people, while the older generation is more divided. However, the oldest informant, a 66-year-old female university professor (Sunni), opposes this statement:

You know, I never felt it in my life. I never felt it in my life, I had a circle of friends, who were like me, who were really secular. And they always thought that you can be religious, you can work on your religion, on the spiritual part of your religion, but stay secular concerning the life of everybody. (Zaina, 66)

This informant's view can perhaps be related to her high level of education. Although it does demonstrate that there are other factors besides age that can determine one's position, generational differences seem to indeed play a role, sometimes explained by opposing those who remember the civil war and are afraid and those who are not.

The perceived divisions can also depend on the type of community. For instance, all 4 unrelated informants with a Druze background talk about strong feelings of divisions, as illustrated by the words of a 23-year-old male student. When asked if he had experienced any divisions, he explains:

Very very very very very much so. [...] I was born in a Druze family, [...] And they are very conservative and [...] very protective of their sectarian identity, so it was always an issue, trying to break free of that. Because I even felt it on a very very personal level, being a queer individual living in Lebanon, I feel like sectarianism is a complete opposite direction of what is safe and what is valid [...] for people in my community. [...] there was always this kind of emphasis on who we are, who we [...] pledge allegiance to. And it's not only that, it's also that there is a sense of teaching [...], that because you are a Druze, then you are going to face a lot of struggles growing up and that this community does not like the Druze, this community does not like the Druze, so it's kind of a narrative that is perpetuated across generations. (Abbas, 23)

The particularly strong feelings may have to do with Druze being a very closed community, as no one can become Druze, and marrying outside the religion means being expelled as a Druze. All these conditions can create an especially protective environment.

In the same way the assumed divisions were confirmed by the informants, the narrative of unity also was clearly reflected in the informants' statements. Virtually all of them expressed certain happiness that people gathered together despite religious and political differences. At the same time, the confidence in unity varied among the informants. Some being very optimistic, others remained suspicious towards the durability of this new unity, seeing obstacles in the memories of the civil war, the closed-mindedness of "others" who still follow the leaders, or doubts about reaching the practical goals. There were also different personal positions: some claimed to have been ready for a change for a while and have waited for "others" to "wake up," while others admitted undergoing personal changes.

Just like divisions seemed to intersect with geographical categories, one of the aspects of unity was related to uniting across different geographical regions. The movement seemed to show that certain stereotypes about various regions were faulty. It was illustrated by, for instance, protesters in the Shi'a-dominated southern area of Nabatieh, who targeted the offices of political leaders despite the assumption of them being particularly keen followers. [60] Sunni-dominated Tripoli has been called "the bride of the revolution" and through their colorful demonstrations gained a lot of positive attention, rebranding from a conservative or even dangerous city to an inspiring example.

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A certain role here might have been played by the fact that different places, just as people, gained visibility which they had not normally had. As commented by one of the university professors, the movement has "discovered" the poor. As the demonstrations were broadcasted on TV and the internet, interviews were taken from many protesters; thus, a chance to hear each other's stories appeared.

New ties across communities can also be related to the movement opening up new spaces for people with different backgrounds to meet. In addition to the protests, various discussions, lectures, film screenings and concerts were arranged on the squares of the demonstrations. The perceived lack of public spaces for people to meet and the idea of "taking back" such spaces was explicitly expressed on the streets. The possibility to meet and connect on other aspects than religion seemed important for many. As a-30-year-old unemployed Christian explains:

I'm Christian Catholic, he's a Muslim, converted Christianity, I have in my tent Muslim Sunni, Muslim Shi'a, I have Derzi [plural of Druze]. And we never ever talk about the religion, ever, you know? The only thing we talk about is that, what's our next move? (Michael, 30)

It has become clear that the divisions along confessional lines are definitely palpable among the informants and tend to intersect with geographical categories, generational differences and political positions. The intensity of experiences may also be affected by education, sexual orientation and other social circumstances. These factors might be seen as having created conditions for competing everyday nationalisms, where the sentiment is directed towards one's sect as a subnationality. This is then not a purely bottom-up process as described by Kaufman, as the everyday practices are heavily impacted by the sectarian structure. Thus, it is in a way the ruling elite that sets the boundaries for this everyday ideology, which is simultaneously reinforced by "following the politicians" representing that ideology. For most of the informants this is, however, no longer a part of "unconscious behavior." This could mean that through everyday practices and interactions not fitting with the old ideology, a new form of unity from below has emerged and reached a tipping point coinciding with the movement of October 17th. The movement provided new spaces for people with different backgrounds to connect on a new basis or engage in "viral peer-to-peer networking," creating a "feedback loop" reinforcing the new unity.

4.2. Building a civil state

The main dividing force identified by the informants was the politicization of religion, or sectarianism, which should be resolved through secularism or building a civil state. [61] It was either clearly expressed through talking about the civil state [dawla madanīya] as a goal or by saying that politics and religions should not be mixed. The divisions were attributed to "them" [politicians] using religion to divide "us," while "we are one people," as illustrated by a statement of a 30-year-old Sunni woman:

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Because these politicians were fueling their sectarianism and they've been sort of trying to use sect as a weakness, tried to intimidate them, that you're threatened, your presence is threatened because the other... While Lebanese people are, you know, they are brothers and sisters. (Lena, 30)

Keeping religion and politics separate was seen as a solution not only for divisions, but for practical problems as well. Some took up, for instance, issues related to interconfessional marriage, which is currently not possible in Lebanon; thus, couples from different confessions travel abroad to get married. Other examples revolved around inheritance and child custody. These issues intersect with women's rights, which were broadly voiced within the movement, as because of the current personal status laws, women may face problems with, for instance, unequal inheritance or losing custody in case of divorce. Although the willingness to change the system stems most clearly from the general discontent and belief in the current state being deeply corrupt, thus changing the whole principle seems to kindle hope even with those who do not seem concerned with secularism as such. Regardless of the different motivations, it seems evident that the idea of building a civil state together played the role of a uniting power.

Ideals of civic nationalism were also often explicit in the informants' statements. When asked what unity among the Lebanese could be based on, a 34-year-old male Shi'a answered:

It must be based on the citizenship, respect for the country. When you respect your country, you respect everyone. If you respect your leader, there is division. (Fadi, 34)

Similarly, many have expressed the vision of a country based on equality and satisfying the citizens' rights and needs, which would raise allegiance to the country above allegiance to one's leader, religion or region.

Despite the feeling of unity around the vision for future Lebanon, in terms of dividing religion and politics, this question is not an easy one. The obstacles were seen as those outside the movement, "they who still follow leaders" and leaders who manipulate religions. Very few saw religion itself as a divisive force; however, a 35-year-old Christian actress acknowledges that certain civil values may contradict the values of religious people who live "by the book" and gives her own example:

My parents are like, they are not extremist, but they are religious and they are... My parents are old, they were raised to be like Christians [...] their children would marry only Christians, you know what I mean? They don't hate Muslims, but they're just like "don't go get married. Like, we're Christians and we stay within the Christian thing." (Maya, 35)

Thus, there is a possibility that the influence of religion as such or the religious and not only political leaders is somewhat underestimated by some.

If we focus on building a civil state as a uniting power, there are still some issues to be resolved. One such issue is determining who would be included in the new "us." For one thing, this is related to the issue of women not being able to transfer citizenship to their children. This question was raised within the movement by women's rights activists and

organizations, such as "My nationality my dignity" [*Jinsiyati Karamati*], working to help families struggling to acquire the Lebanese nationality. While many support this struggle, others are actually opposed to it. A female Sunni student from Tripoli, for instance, believes that as the Lebanese do not get the same rights in the neighboring Arab countries, the same should apply here (many of those facing the issue actually being Syrian or Palestinian refugees or migrants). Another informant, a female master's student born in a Palestinian refugee camp in Beirut, shared that she has for a long time felt repulsed by anything Lebanese until this movement. It was due to the struggles and the exclusion she had to face because of her status, which improved only when she married a Lebanese man. While the movement did give her hope and even inspired somewhat patriotic feelings towards Lebanon, the outcome concerning the exclusion of people with refugee status may affect her feeling as a part of the new "us." [62] The attitude towards refugees as such may be a somewhat divisive question while a part of the protestors feel that refugee rights is one of their goals of the movement, others are very cautious about Lebanese exclusively benefiting from it, as put by an unemployed 30-year-old Christian:

[...] we have to like don't look on the outside foreigners, such as other countries, they look first of all for their hometown people. No more "you go get the foreigners to start working." But here, everywhere you go, you find other nationalities. I'm not talking about Europeans, no, I'm talking about Syrians. Syrians, Syrians, Syrians, Syrians, wherever you go. Wherever you go, you know? What about us? (Michael, 30)

Nevertheless, the idea of building a civil state was overwhelmingly present and could be seen as an expression of civic nationalism working as a unifying power, whereby the top-down reinforcement of the communal identities would be eliminated, while the communities could maintain their differences and unite around "the idiom of nationhood," as suggested by Kaufman. The issue is complicated by some differences in the vision of the nation, that impact people's rights or even inclusion in this nation. This diversity in personal nationalisms can hardly be accommodated without impacting the extent of the national unity.

4.3. Under the Lebanese flag and national pride

A recurring motive within the movement was that of finding a new pride in being Lebanese and raising it above all other categories. In this case the feelings can be based on both cultural categories and ethnic nationalism, or solidarity with fellow citizens, and civic nationalism at the same time.

One aspect that could be related to both forms of nationalism is language. Civic nationalism is concerned with language at least as a part of social infrastructure. [63] On the other hand, language maybe seen as a cultural trait not necessarily shared by all the citizens. [64] Here, language has been important both in terms of infrastructure and its cultural value. The majority of universities in Lebanon teach in English,

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with rarer instances of French as the language of instruction. Within the movement, various discussions and lectures were arranged in Arabic, which was emphasized as important both for making them accessible to everybody and for raising the status of the local language.

When asked about the meaning of being Lebanese, some informants mentioned historical roots, relation to Phoenicians, food or cultural diversity. In answering such questions, people were searching for cultural traits shared by all and not divisive. Perhaps, while rediscovering pride in being Lebanese, a process of attributing this feeling with certain cultural values took place. Then the values which support the civic "us" were emphasized, and not those which would divide the common "us" into smaller groups. The most frequent answer defining being Lebanese was related to being happy or "knowing how to live." This trait was reflected by the mode of the protest itself. The demonstrations included a lot of singing, dancing and had an overall cheerful character, at least in the first weeks of the movement. Some criticized this as ineffective, but accepted the songs as long as they were patriotic thus, the importance of raising national feelings was consciously acknowledged. At the same time, while critiquing the excessive celebratory mood, the "Lebaneseness" of it was often accepted. As put by a 26-year-old Christian woman: "And I was saying this is not a way of protesting. Maybe it is a Lebanese way, if you want, but there are limits." Thus, while perceived by some as impractical, the dancing and singing might have played a role in "defining who we are through how we do things." [65]

The celebratory mode of the demonstrations may be seen as a part of searching for common cultural traits to emphasize and build national feelings on. At the same time, as mentioned by some informants, the cultural variation could itself be a distinguishing trait for the Lebanese. From Kaufman's point of view, all of this might be strengthening the national sentiment through relation to "the idiom of nationhood."

The movement could also be characterized by an extensive presence of various national symbols. The meaning of the flag was acknowledged both physically and symbolically, emphasizing unity under the Lebanese flag, or people of many religions all carrying one flag. Music and particularly patriotic songs, constantly played at the squares of the demonstrations, could have both helped to fuel the national feelings, and played a role in charging the national symbols with positive connotations, as suggested by Kolstø. It is though fair to mention that the affection for the flag was not entirely universal. A 23-year-old Druze student explains:

I'm someone [...] who's not very friends with the idea of nationalism or like patriotism. [...] during all the revolution, the entire time, I would always refuse to carry like a Lebanese flag or to put any sort of national sentiments onto myself, because I don't think that that's the essence of it. And I do believe that it could actually lead to more harm than good, because once identities are accentuated to a certain extent and so politically infused, especially in times of turmoil, we can easily go back to the "us versus them" kind of mentality. (Abbas, 23)

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A critical approach to nationalism has to do with caution towards new divisions and can be related to the informant being a master's student of political science, well aware of the pitfalls of nationalism, which can reflect the feelings of others in his circle. Nevertheless, the overwhelming number of national symbols displayed in the demonstrations shows that they did play an important role in uniting the protesters, and probably raising the prestige of the symbols themselves.

4.4. "They don't give us anything": the elite and the question of effectiveness

The main basis for people to unite upon and reject the old system or perhaps reach the tipping point seems to be related to their material needs. It can be illustrated by an answer of a 24-year-old man from a Shi'a-Sunni family to a question on what could unite the people in the long run: "There is already unity. Politicians don't give us anything." This simply sums up the unity emerging from discontent with the current situation. A recurring narrative on the streets had to do with the suffering that was equal among the Lebanese of different religions, and the realization that, as explained by one of the informants, a Christian in Lebanon does not have the same problems as a Christian in Syria, but the same as his fellow Lebanese Muslim.

It has become clear for many that the old system cannot satisfy their needs, which contributed to the willingness to reject the whole ideology behind that system. The crisis brought with it multiple situations that created incentives for people to unite. As illustrated by an example from an unemployed 30-year-old Christian:

When the petrol got blocked, no more petrol. [Referring to a strike of petrol stations. [66] *] All of the cars, from all of the religions, everyone here stopped their cars in the middle of the street. Is it Sunni, Christian, Druze, Shi'a? All stopped in the middle of the street. (Michael, 30)*

While the unity based on the discontent seems to be evident, its durability might be dependent on the success of the movement. The informants are conscious about that, saying "For unity to stay we need results." Thus, the new national feelings might also at least partially depend on the practical outcome, as addressed by a psychiatrist from Syria providing acute psychological help at the site of the demonstrations:

I do believe this square is a new identity formation. And I don't think it's random, because you come here and you think it's not a political protest. This is a carnival. And I think this is for a reason, because, there is nothing else that would unite these people, other than just dancing and singing. Which is fine for now [...] but then you hope [it would] develop a political agenda, form into a political party and field candidates, because I don't know how this going to make any difference, unless it matures into a movement. (Farid, 40s)

This comment raises an important question not addressed by Kaufman, that is the issue of effectiveness of an ideology. If the elite-driven nationalism does depend on it, perhaps so does the bottom-up national sentiment, which poses the question of leadership.

The movement of October 17th has without failure been presented as leaderless. The response to the continuous pressure from the government to appoint leaders for discussions was that the demands were clear and that no negotiations were needed. In addition, the slogan "I am the leader of the revolution" was spread on social media and through artistic means on the squares: the multiple drawings and mirrors with the phrase were put on the walls for people to take pictures of and share their selfies. This created a certain sense of unity and pride in itself, as did different collective actions, such as cleaning the squares and sorting the garbage, arranging the celebration of the National Day, and other activities through which a message that the Lebanese people can take care of their country better than their leaders was spread. In the ideological sense, having no leaders might indeed have facilitated a "viral" spread.

In practical terms, some felt leaders were necessary for reaching the goals of the movement. Others praised the absence of leaders within the movement, seeing it as a "new way," or expressing fear that if appointed, they would be eliminated by the government. This view was also expressed by an informant from Lihaqqi. [67] This is somewhat contradictory, as the informant himself is working to become a part of future leadership. In terms of obstacles, the informant mainly saw the old political leaders who had not yet "used their aggressiveness." From conversations with other informants, however, it seemed that the trust in the political civil society groups themselves is not always that strong. The break with the old system and the decisive rejection of its leaders might at the same time have made it difficult for any new leaders to emerge. Even those expressing a desperate need of a leader at times disregarded already existing groups. Some expressed suspicion towards any organizations participating in the movement, as they might be chasing political goals, which is perceived as negative due to a deep mistrust in politicians overall. It points to a vicious circle of a kind, where being a part of the system means being corrupt, and having succeeded in establishing a somewhat successful group means being a part of the system. This does not mean that all the participants of the movement rejected all the groups. The presence of civil society organizations has still been creating an opportunity to expand their ties and influence through arranging discussions and lectures as well as participating in various actions, thus working through peer-to-peer networks, but their presence has not been unchallenged.

Meanwhile, the rejection of the "old leaders" and embracing the principle of "Everyone means everyone" seemed universal. On the surface, it could have been summed up by opposition of "us," who have left divisions behind and are building a new Lebanon, and "them," who still follow their leaders. When examined more closely, the relationship with the old leaders seemed to be more complex. For some, rejecting all the leaders was unquestionable, while for others it posed a challenge, as illustrated by one of the Druze informants:

We need to agree about "Everyone means everyone." I sacrificed my culture. I love Walid Jumblatt. [68] *He opens his house to people every week, but I'm not one hundred percent sure he is not corrupt, so we need to*

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sacrifice. We need a judge, we cannot always trust our feelings. If I sacrifice and Hizbullah people sacrifice, we can be as one Lebanese people. (Amin, 20s)

A 34-year-old male Shi'a has on the contrary said that he is against the "Everyone means everyone," as it would lead to chaos, while some others expressed more complex views on the leader of Hizbullah in particular. More fluctuations could probably be revealed at a more thorough examination of the question of leadership. At the same time, it seemed clear that the unity is heavily reliant on shared grievances and rejecting the old leaders along with the ineffective ideology associated with them. It can then seem that a bottom-up version of civic nationalism is opposed to "ethnic" (in terms of loyalties) top-down nationalism. This would, however, entail an oversimplification. The old ideology is hardly exclusively top-down, as it can be seen as reinforced through everyday nationalism, even if it is shaped by the elite-sponsored structure. At the same time, while the bottom-up character of the new ideology seems to facilitate its "viral" spread, its durability might be dependent on resolving the grievances that triggered the rejection of the old ideology and thus leadership. The failure to resolve these issues might reinstate the importance of clientelistic ties shaping people's networking. On the other hand, as the space for the new national unity seems to have appeared despite the seemingly rigid social structure, there is basis to believe that it may persevere after a period of intensive "peer-to-peer networking." Nevertheless, the question of how meaningful a national sentiment can be if people's basic needs are not satisfied remains open.

Conclusion

This article, based on an ethnographic study conducted in Beirut between October 17 and December 19, 2019, analyzes the Lebanese movement of October 17th as an instance of nation-building from below, seeking to understand how the emerging national unity was being constructed, what it was based on and what are the implications for its durability, while paying attention to the role of the elite in this process.

First of all, the assumption that certain divisions along sectarian lines are present in the Lebanese society were checked against the gathered data. The divisions have proven to be palpable and often related to geographical categories, generational differences, economic circumstances and political positions. These factors might be seen as have created conditions for competing everyday nationalisms which are at the same time reinforced by elite. However, a unity across the different communities seems to have emerged from below and reached a tipping point coinciding with the movement of October 17th. The movement provided new spaces for people with different backgrounds to engage in "viral peer-to-peer networking" creating a "feedback loop" reinforcing the new unity.

The newly found unity can be seen as largely related to shared grievances, which pushed the different communities to cooperate and

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reject the old system and its elite. The new system is envisioned in terms of a civil state, where politics are separated from religion and the citizens are loyal to the state. The unity was being reinforced by a vast presence of national symbols and emphasis on being Lebanese.

The "viral" spread of national ideas seemed to be effectively taking place, which is likely to have facilitated creating new ties for continued "peer-to-peer networking." There are, however, some unresolved challenges posed for the new unity. While the agreement on the need for the civil state seemed universal among the informants, the contents of the state were not. The discrepancies revolved around refugee and women's rights, most importantly in terms of the right to pass nationality. Such disagreements cannot be reconciled by "the idiom of nationhood" as they concern the very inclusion in the nation itself.

Perhaps most importantly, the question of effectiveness of the ideology remains open and is related to the question of the elite. It seems to be clear that elite or leaders are not necessary for a national sentiment to emerge, but it is still arguable in terms of its durability. The rejection of the old leaders and the leaderless character of the movement seem to have largely been unifying ideologically. At the same time, the lack of leadership may impair finding practical solutions for the grievances that pushed people to their tipping point in the first place. It is still not clear if actors associated with the movement will be able to occupy important leadership positions, which could likely strengthen the new ideology. If the old elite endures, the question might be perhaps how durable a bottom-up ideology can be if restrained and opposed by material circumstances.

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Appendix: informants

- A few times religion was not specified and marked "n/a." It is otherwise noted as expressed by the informant, that is, if the answer was "Christian," without specifying denomination, it was recorded accordingly. When available, an answer given instead of religion is quoted.

- When only an interval and not specific age was provided it is recorded accordingly.
- When specific information on occupation was provided, it is recorded; otherwise, the relevant column is marked with "x".
- If other available information is assumed to be relevant here, it is provided in the column "Other".

No	Gender	Religion	Age	Working	Student	Other
No	Gender	Religion	Age	Working	Student	Other
1	male	Shi'a–Sunni	24	x		Works in Kongo
2	male	n/a	40+	Psychiatrist		From Syria
3	male	Druze	23		x	
4	male	Druze	20+	At a bank		
5	male	n/a	50+	Businessman; with the organization "My nationality my dignity"		
6	male	Shi'a	20+	At a bank		
7	male	atheist	30+	Businessman, political activist ("Lihaqqi")		
8	male	Shi'a	34	Teacher		
9	female	n/a	30	x		
10	male	"I don't believe in religion"	35	x		Lived abroad
10	male	Shi'a	34	Unemployed		Lives at the protest camp, born in UAE
11	female	Mixed family		x		
12	female	Sunni	30	Unemployed, architect		
13	female	"I don't belong to any religion."	27	Flight attendant		Partially Ukrainian
14	male	"I have never said I'm from this community or I'm Muslim or I'm Christian."	20+	x	x (second degree)	
15	female	Sunni	20+		x (Master's)	Grew up in Palestinian refugee camp.
16	male	Shi'a–Christian	20+		x	
17	male	Druze	20+	x	x	
18	female	Sunni	18		x	LGBTQ
19	male	Atheist	30+	Social entrepreneur		Works in France
20	female	n/a	40+	x		Lives abroad
21	female	Christian	26	x		
22	female	n/a	20+	Start-upper		
23	male	"I'm Lebanese only"	30+	x		
24	male	Christian	28	Writing a film script		Lebanese–Greek–Armenian
25	male	Sunni/Atheist	23		x	
26	male	n/a	25	DJ		Syrian father
27	male	n/a	23	Unemployed	Dropped out	Syrian–Lebanese
28	male	Christian	30	Unemployed (worked as a security guard)		Lives at the protest camp, mother from Philippines
29	female	Sunni	20+		x	From Tripoli
30	female	Christian	35	Actress		
31	male	Sunni	33	x, Former politician		Studied in France
32	female	Sunni	66	University professor		
33	male	Druze	23		x (Master's)	LGBTQ

Notes

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12   Ibid., Social Movements, p. 1–2.

13   Ibid., Collective action (collective behavior), p. 1.

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68   The most prominent Druze leader, the leader of the Progressive Socialist Party, for more details, see, for instance: *Encyclopedia of the Modern Middle East and North Africa,* https://www.encyclopedia.com/international/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/jumblatt-walid-1949, 2021-01-31.