

Under the Glass Ceiling and in the Family 'Cage': The Role of Women in Lebanese Politics

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Abstract

Throughout Lebanese history women have managed to reach the top of the political pyramid and fill leadership positions to a degree that does not exist in other Arab countries. While the phenomenon is most widespread in the Maronite Christian community, in the Druze, Shiite and Sunni communities it manifests itself mainly as women filling in for men or being the power behind the scenes. The political presence described above, however, does not represent a major breakthrough or the abandonment of the rather narrow framework that is generally available for women. In almost every case women who achieve political prominence are, at present or have been in the past, filling some position temporarily for their husbands or some other close relative, until the next male generation of the family can take over. This phenomenon is made possible mainly by the fragmented and family oriented character of Lebanese politics. The article examines the phenomenon of women leaders in Lebanon, through analyzing the case studies of such women after which it will discuss the importance and significance of this phenomenon.

Keywords

Lebanon; Women in Lebanon; Maronites; Druze; Nazira Jumblatt; Shiites.

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Introduction

At the beginning of June 2017 the Lebanese public indulged itself during the usual “summer heat wave,” with something that was truly a “storm in a teapot.” It had to do with the question of whether the movie “Wonder Woman” should be screened in the country or not. The film, which had been released several weeks before the controversy arose in Lebanon, had received a warm reception from both critics and audiences all over the world and soon became a widely discussed hit. As a result, while movie theaters in Lebanon began preparations to show the film and even began to sell tickets, supporters of the anti-Israel Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) Movement, and especially Hezbollah supporters, began a campaign to ban the screening of the film in Lebanese theaters because Gal Gadot, who played the heroine, was Israeli and had even served in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). Many Lebanese raised their voices in protest at this effort to impose “political censorship” in their country, which claims to be an island of the Western lifestyle and democracy in the Arab world. It is indeed true that Lebanese society has often revealed openness and even a surprising willingness to put up with such extreme manifestations of Western fashion such as the LGBT movement.

Particularly interesting is the fact that quite a few women in Lebanon have spoken out claiming that the film actually helps empower women and arguing that the imposition of a ban on its screening would send a negative message to the country’s women. These voices of protest remained unheeded since the Ministry of the Interior in Beirut, on the grounds of protecting public security, decided to prohibit the public screening of the film anyway. As a result the Lebanese can only watch the movie by downloading it on their computers or by borrowing it from the country’s DVD libraries, something which they have done in massive numbers.¹

One can perhaps argue about whether the film “Wonder Woman” starring Gal Gadot can actually make any contribution to the empowerment of women in Lebanon and whether the decision to ban its screening will impact negatively on the efforts to empower them.

¹ Zahraa Alkhalisi, “‘Wonder Woman’ banned in Lebanon because lead actress is Israeli,” *CNN*, 1 June 2017, <http://money.cnn.com/2017/06/01/media/wonder-woman-banned-lebanon/index.html> (accessed: June 6, 2017).

The very fact that these issues have been raised, however, draws attention to another aspect of the country that makes it unique in the Arab world. Not only is Lebanon a country of many contradictory characteristics which projects openness and moderation, on the one hand, and extremism and uncompromising radicalism, on the other, it is also exceptional in the fact that it has a significant female population that not only fights resolutely to improve the status of women in the society, but has, in many cases, succeeded in its struggle to liberate women from the traditional domestic and family "cage" imposed upon them and favored by their society.

It is a fact that many Lebanese women, and certainly relatively many more than in the surrounding Arab world, have succeeded in acquiring a high status and much prestige in cultural life and the world of the media. Even more interesting, perhaps, is the fact that some Lebanese women have managed to reach the top of the political pyramid and are filling leadership positions that would be unthinkable in other Arab countries. Having said this, it must be admitted that the way women are integrated into Lebanese politics, though unique and noteworthy in itself, is not necessarily proof of their progress or of women's liberation. Some women even claim that the opposite may be the case and that, perhaps, the existing situation is actually a perfect example of conservatism and a commitment to the traditional patterns of behavior in Lebanese society that aim at preserving the inferior status of women.

Although the question of the particular role played by women in Lebanese public life and politics is of great interest, until now it has not received sufficient attention from students of Lebanese society, politics, and history and most studies of the country have focused on the struggles between the various ethnic and religious communities, and sometimes on the struggles between different notable families within each community. This approach has a measure of justification since the abovementioned struggles constitute the most prominent aspect of the country's public and political life. The studies that have focused on women's role have dealt mainly with the women's struggle for survival as wives and mothers, especially during the period of the country's bloody civil war. Others have focused on those exceptional women who have managed to break through the prevailing social

barriers and attain status and influence, although this has almost exclusively been in the fields of culture and the media.²

Considering the severity of such conditions, it is difficult to imagine how any woman could break her way into the center of the political arena and fill a leadership role in her family or in the community. In the cases, however, where women have actually succeeded in achieving the above, not infrequently, the role they have been able to fill has, unfortunately, been only a “behind the scenes” role. This is especially true in the Christian Maronite and Greek Orthodox communities although there are also women who have functioned as leaders, even if from behind the scene, in the Sunni, Druze, and even the Shiite communities.

It is worth noting that the question of women leaders in Lebanon is part of the more complex question of the role of women in Arab countries as whole and Muslim countries more generally. This topic has recently been extensively studied not only as part of the interest aroused by gender studies but also because, for a while, it seemed that the revolutionary events of the “Arab Spring” were expressing, and even generating, a change in the status of women and perhaps even in the traditional attitude to women in the Arab world. One does have to admit, however, that the phenomenon of women playing key political roles in Muslim societies, even where it does exist, is still marginal.³

In the Muslim World, we can name women who have succeeded in the political world such as Indonesian President Megawati Sukarnoputri (2001-2004), Turkish Prime Minister Tansu Çiller (1993-1996), Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto (1988-1990 and 1993-1996 - the daughter of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who served as Pakistani Prime Minister from 1973-1977), Bangladesh Prime

2 See for example Lamia Rustum Shehadeh (ed.) *Women and War in Lebanon* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1999).

3 Nawal El Saadawi, *The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World* (New York: Zed books, 2007); Pernille Arenfeldt and Nawar Al-Hassan Golley (eds.) *A Century of Transformations from Within: Mapping Arab Women's Movements* (Cairo, Egypt: American University of Cairo Press, 2012); Valentine M. Moghadam, Nabil F. Khoury, *Gender and Development in the Arab World: Women's Economic Participation: Patterns and Policies* (New York: United Nations University Press, 1995); Adel S. Abadeer, *Norms and Gender Discrimination in the Arab World* (New York: Routledge, 2015); Jean Makdissi, Noha Bayoumi, and Rafif Rida Sidawi (eds.) *Arab Feminisms: Gender and Equality in the Middle East* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2014); Maha El Said, Lena Meari, and Nicola Pratt (eds.), *Rethinking Gender in Revolutions and Resistance: Lessons from the Arab World* (New York: Zed Books, 2015).

Minister Sheikh Hasina Wazed (1996-2001 and 2009- the present – the elder daughter of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, founder of the modern Bangladesh state), and others. We should note that in some of the cases just mentioned the situation was similar to that of Lebanon in which the woman who rose to the top was continuing her family's rule over an "inherited" or family controlled political estate. In Arab Muslim societies, however, even this rarely exists.

It is true that in many Arab countries one can find some women who play a role in the essentially male dominated political and governmental systems but these women serve as spokespersons in the effort to put on a good face for the West. One example is Ms. Buthayna Sha`ban who rose to the rank of political and media adviser to the President Hafiz al-Asad and then to his son and successor, Bashar al-Asad and who basically was a Syrian version of the Palestinians' well-known spokesperson, Hanan Ashrawi. The wives of many leaders also found themselves taking over leading and influential positions, even if only behind the scenes, due to their husband's succumbing to old age or illness. In regard to Jordan, however, we have the somewhat unusual case of Queen Zayn al-Sharaf Talal, which slightly resembles the situation in Lebanon, and should also be mentioned. Queen Zayn was the wife of King Talal and mother of King Husayn but, when her husband Talal was dethroned in 1951 due to mental problems, she became the strongest person in the kingdom and remained so during most of the 1950s, at least up till 1958. One must also note that the "Arab Spring" of 2011 brought the controversial roles of two other Arab women, Suzanne Mubarak in Egypt and Leila Trabulsi in Tunisia, into the spotlight. The roles they played marked a kind of return to a familiar model from the Moslem, and even the Ottoman, past, although the phenomenon of a ruler's mother or wife taking over from him is not unique to this part of the world. These few examples of women playing active roles in the public sphere, however, by no means testifies to a general rule but rather alludes to the difficulties women face when trying to enter the public arena so that they can play a role that goes beyond being merely symbolic, representative and confined to the "golden cage" reserved for women under the "glass ceiling".

This article will examine the phenomenon of those women in Lebanon who are playing or have played a political role. The article is based on the case studies of such women, on the basis of which it will seek to examine the importance and significance of this phenomenon. It will then proceed to survey the unique characteristics of the political system in Lebanon and discuss paradigmatic cases of women political leaders in Lebanon and the significance of this phenomenon.

Lebanon – background and roots

A common mistake that is made is to analyze Lebanon in terms of the tension between the country's two main religious camps, the Christians and the Moslems, who are indeed rivals. It should, however, be remembered that these religious camps have never been strongly unified entities that stand united behind an idea or a goal but have often been marked by internal divisiveness based upon communal affiliation. Each religious camp has in the past experienced, and is still experiencing, rivalry between the members of the different religious communities of which it is composed. The Moslem camp, for example, is made up of Sunnis, Shiites, and Druze, while the Christian camp is made up of Maronites, Greek Orthodox, Greek Catholics, and others.

The attempts that have been made to understand the Lebanese enigma through using the key of ethnic community have also been a failure mainly because the different communities within each religious camp have always been, and still are, less united and cohesive than they seem to be on the surface. Most of the time family affiliations have been the main cause of division in the same religious community since, within each community its prominent and influential families have always quarreled among themselves and, in practice, have established a kind of balance of power. Examples of this are the Jumblatt and Arslan families in the Druze community, the Khoury and Eddé families and, later, the Franjiyya, Chamoun, Hirawi, and Lahoud families in the Maronite community, the Sulh, Yafi, Salam, Karami, and other families in the Sunni community and others in other communities. Sometimes things were relatively peaceful because there was a balance of power but consequent tensions and rivalries between the several branches of a single

family, and even within the narrow family unit between a father and his sons or between brothers, would arise.

This system of a balance of forces, and even a balance of terror, which operated among all the factors that exercised power in the country – i.e. the religious camps, the religious communities in each religious camp and the families in each community – contributed significantly to the preservation and consolidation of the stability of the Lebanese system for many years. This was because the system prevented any one of the rivals – whether on the community, religious, or family level – from being completely victorious. From this we can understand the iron rule that prevails in Lebanon namely, that in any confrontation or struggle that takes place in the country there will be no absolute victor or absolute loser (*la ghalib, la maghlub*). Consequently, each community has had to seek out a formula that promotes coexistence, no matter how unstable and fragile this might be, so that they all can continue to live their lives in relative peace and security.

The great importance of the religious community is clearly very prominent in Lebanese society but so is the family framework which has always constituted the basic framework of identification in the country. After all, in Lebanon, no matter what one's status and position are, one acts first and foremost as the representative of one's family and its interests since the life of the individual in Lebanon is lived within the family framework. In order to secure one's present, and future one must depend completely upon one's family and, as a rule, most families in turn need to depend on one of the prominent families that exercise vast control over the lives of the entire community. In each community there are always several powerful families who control the members of the community because they are either landowners, or wealthy and economically well-established. It goes without saying that the prominent families in each community have struggled with each other for control of both the members of the community and the governmental positions allocated to each community by virtue of the National Pact of 1943 or because of similar agreements and understandings. The leaders of the Lebanese communities, from their point of view, have usually

acted wisely to preserve the social, economic, and political situation that prevailed on Mount Lebanon and along the Lebanese coast even before the establishment of Greater Lebanon.⁴

This has been the process which made Lebanon a state of all its communities or, to be more precise, a state of all its prominent and notable families, in which the institution of a national state is merely treated as a loose and non-binding framework that enables each family and community to continue to manage its affairs almost completely autonomously. This has ultimately resulted in a type of anarchy in governance that has occasionally degenerated into bloody civil warfare. At the same time, however, the result can also be looked at slightly more optimistically since the nature of Lebanese politics has made it possible for Lebanon and Lebanese society to enjoy long periods of political pluralism as well as intellectual and economic pluralism which, in the Middle East, are unprecedented. It seems that most Lebanese willingly accepted the existing situation and are proud of their Lebanese identity which has, rather ironically, meant the absence of any commitment to the institution of the Lebanese state. In its place what exists is the recognition and acceptance of a reality in which the state is a loose framework for a system based upon family and communal ties.⁵

As for the role of women in Lebanese politics and social life, it should be noted that, in the existing environment of divisiveness and fragmentation and a context in which one's community and, in particular, one's family affiliations, have great influence, marriage is a vitally important instrument in the political and social status game. Families use marriage as a means to strengthen their standing by making alliances or reducing rivalries with other families. Marriages arranged with a family designated bride turn the women involved into pawns in the game and thus preserve, and even reinforce, the

4 Basim al-Jisr, *Mithaq 1943* (the 1943 Charter) (Beirut: Dar al-Nahar lilNashr, 1978), in Arabic; Samir Khalaf, *Lebanon's Predicament* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987); Albert Hourani, *Political Society in Lebanon, a Historical Introduction* (Oxford: Centre for Lebanese Studies, 1988); Nadim Shehadi and Daana Haffar Mils (eds.) *Lebanon, A History of Conflict and Consensus* (London: I. B Tauris, 1988); Eyal Zisser, *Lebanon, The Challenge of Independence* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2000).

5 Sami Hermez, *War is Coming, between Past and Future Violence in Lebanon* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017).

woman's subordinate place in the society. A glance at contemporary Lebanese politics as well as the history of the country, however, reveals that, despite this, some women have succeeded in reaching positions of leadership and influence even if, in most cases, they are merely stand-ins or temporary replacements for their husbands. The stories of several Lebanese women who seem to have broken through the glass ceiling, but who may have actually helped to preserve and strengthen it, are instructive in this regard.

The Druze community – the story of Nazira Jumblatt

Nazira Jumblatt (1890-1951) was the daughter of Faris and Afrida Sa'id Jumblatt and a member of the Jumblatt family which was, perhaps the most prominent family in the Druze community in the Shuf Mountain area of Mount Lebanon. As was customary in the Druze community of the early 20th century, Nazira received no formal education but was educated at home by her grandmother and private tutors brought in especially for her taught her to be fluent in English and French. At the age of 15 she married a Jumblatt family relative, Fu'ad Bek Jumblatt who became so close to the French Mandatory authorities after the French took control of the Levant following World War I that they appointed him governor (qaim maqam) of his home district. On 6 August 1921 he was ambushed, shot, and killed which led to Nazira stepping into his shoes and becoming the leader of her family and her whole community for a quarter of a century. She continued her husband's policy of cooperating with the French authorities and, as part of this framework, she also cooperated with the most prominent ally of the French in the 1930s and 1940s, the Maronite politician Emile Eddé. When her son Kamal, who was born in 1917, reached maturity in the mid-1940s, he began to take over her position as leader of the Druze community. It is worth noting that Kamal, as required by the political climate of the period, adopted an orientation that was opposite to that of his mother.⁶

⁶ Najib Al-Bu'ayni, "al-Sit Nazira Junblat (1890-1951)," *al-Anba'*, December 16, 2015, <http://anbaaonline.com/?p=392353>; Shawkat Ashti, *al-Sit Nazira Junblat min Hudud al-'A'ila ila Rubu' al-Watan* (Nazira Junblat between the family and the homeland) (Beirut: Dar al-Nahar, 2015) (Arabic); Ghassan al-'Ayyash, "Nazira Junblat: Jisr bayn Tarikhayn" (Nazira Junblat, bridging between two historical periods) *al-Nahar*, March 21, 2015, <https://newspaper.annahar.com/article/222944> (accessed: June 6, 2017).

The fact that Nazira was a woman prevented her from appearing in public as a leader and person of influence and, in her rare public appearances, she used to wear the Hijab which, in turn, limited her ability to play a role in the halls of government in Beirut. Thus, despite the power she had gained, she could manage the affairs of her community only in closed rooms hidden from the public eye. Even operating from these rooms, however, she was able, with a high hand and great sophistication, to influence the internal politics of the Druze community and preserve the status of her family.

It is possible that it was the limitations placed upon Nazira as a woman which enabled Majid Arslan, a scion of the Arslan family, the Jumblatts' historical rival for control of the Druze community on Mount Lebanon, to become a leading force in the community at the same time as Nazira was active. The power Majid gained was due, among other things, to his alliance with the British during World War II when the British were allies of General Charles de Gaulle's anti-Vichy French forces, which took control of the region in the summer of 1941 and became the de facto rulers of the area. Despite Majid Arslan's preferential status with the British and his alliance with Lebanon's first post-independence president, Bishara al-Khoury, he was unable to bring about any change in the historical balance of power between the Jumblatt and Arslan families, which had tended to favor Jumblatts ever since the 18th century. The results of the parliamentary elections at the time testify to this as the Jumblatts succeeded in maintaining their status as the pivotal force in the Druze community on Mount Lebanon.

It seems that, due to the limitations imposed on her as a woman, and perhaps because she belonged to a generation whose time had passed, Nazira Jumblatt found it difficult to adapt to the winds of change. In the 1940s she continued to cooperate with the French Mandate authorities even after the French had lost their status in the Levant to Britain and also continued to cooperate with Emile Eddé, whose power in the Maronite community was in decline. Like Nazira, he was a friend and ally of the French but he was also a Maronite separatist at a time when the power of his rival, Bishara al-Khoury, was rising, which was possibly due the fact that al-Khoury had

adopted an approach that sought to bring the Maronite Christians closer to the Arab world around them and showed a willingness to cooperate with the Arab circles in Lebanon.⁷

By the time she died Nazira's son, Kamal, had reached maturity and he quickly stepped into his mother's shoes, turned the family's policies completely around and, by doing so, restored the family's status to one of unquestioned leadership in the Druze community and in Lebanese politics. Kamal, we note, married a daughter of the rival Arslan family, Amira May, the daughter of Emir Shakib Arslan and adopted a pan-Arabic identity, as required by the political climate of the times in Lebanon and the entire Middle East. In 1949 he founded the National Progressive Party whose goal was to serve as a political body that would properly represent the interests of the Druze community and the Jumblatt family in the turbulent waters of Lebanese politics of that period. Kamal, who from his early days stood out because of his charisma and who was clearly trying to achieve the virtually impossible role of becoming an all-Lebanese, and even pan-Arab, leader and not just a Druze leader, eventually had to be satisfied with becoming one of the most important Lebanese politicians of the twentieth century.⁸

Nazira Jumblatt's story calls to mind the story of Na'ifa Jumblatt (1810-1880), who played an important role during the civil war between the Druze and the Maronite Christians on Mount Lebanon in the middle of the 19th century. Na'ifa, who lost her husband when she was twenty and never married again, not only led her community but also fought alongside other prominent Druze leaders such as her relative, Sa'id Jumblatt. While some have described her as showing no compassion for Christians who asked her for mercy others refer to the pity and compassion she showed towards her opponents after she had defeated them.⁹

7 Yusri Hazran, *The Druze Community and the Lebanese State. Between Confrontation and Reconciliation* (New York: Routledge, 2014), pp. 15-47.

8 Farid al-Khazen, "Kamal Jumblatt, The Uncrowded Druze Prince of the Left," *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. Vol. 24, No. 2 (April 1988), pp. 178-205; Kamal Jumblatt, *I Speak for Lebanon* (London: Zed Press, 1982); Khalil Ahmad Khalil, *Kamal Junblat, Thawrat al-Amir al-Hadith* (Kamal Junblat, the Revolution of the Modern Amir) (Lebanon: Dar al-Taqaddumiyya, 1984) (in Arabic).

9 Salibi, *The Modern History of Lebanon*, p. 98; see also Muzid Hasan Salih, "al-Sayyida Na'ifa Junblat," *al-Amama*, No. 1, http://www.al-amama.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=2071 (accessed: June 7, 2017).

There is also evidence of other women from Naifa's time who served as guardians and protectors of their family's interests such as Habusha Arslan to whom Bashir II, the last emir of Mount Lebanon, gave control over several Druze-dominated regions that included the home region of the Arslan family as well as the Shuwayfat and 'Armon, Bashmon, and `Ayn Jisr regions. In a similar move Bashir II gave Umma Mansur, the daughter of a Maronite Christian family, control over the al-Khazin family lands after her husband's death.¹⁰

We note parenthetically that Kamal Jumblatt, like his father Fu'ad, did not die a natural death but was murdered in March 1977, to all appearances, by the Syrians, and was succeeded by his son Walid. Kamal's death came less than a year after the murder of his sister Linda in May 1976 in her East Beirut apartment possibly by men of the Maronite militias who were fighting Kamal Jumblatt's faction at the time – but this has not been proven. Linda was known to have been a free spirited woman who chose the modern lifestyle of East Beirut, the Christian area of the city, over life in the Mount Lebanon regions populated by the Druze.¹¹

At the age of twenty Walid Jumblatt married Jirfit, a Jordanian woman of Circassian origin and, at that time, it was rumored that his father Kamal had disapproved of the marriage. Although Walid's second wife was Nura al-Sharabati, the daughter of the former Sunni Syrian Defense Minister Ahmad al-Sharabat, it was Jirfit who bore Walid his son, Taymur, to whom Walid handed over the leadership of the Druze community in March 2017, on the fortieth anniversary of Kamal Junbalt's murder (1977). Taymur, who was born in 1982, is married to Diana Zu`ytar, a Shiite woman from the Zu`ytar family in the Biqa' Valley.¹²

The Maronite Christian community – Solange Gemayel, Sethrida Tawk Geagea, and Na'ila Mu'awad

There were also women in the Maronite Christian community who made their way into the political arena or were perhaps forced against their will into taking on a political role. In contrast to Nazira

10 Salibi, *The Modern History of Lebanon*, pp. 18-39.

11 Eyal Zisser, *The Bleeding Cedar, From the Civil War to the Second Lebanon War* (Hakibutz Hameuchad, 2009), p. 75 (in Hebrew).

12 "Zawjat al-Rajul al-Tha'ir" (the wife of the rebel) *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, June 10, 2008, <http://archive.aawsat.com/details.asp?issueno=10626&article=473572#.WTxGTGjytNI> (accessed: June 10, 2017).

Jumblatt, they were actually able to obtain formal positions even if only for short periods or as temporary fill-ins for someone else. The stories of Solange al-Gemayel, Sethrida Tawk Geagea, and Na'ila Mu'awad serve as examples of this phenomenon.

Solange Louis al-Gemayel

Solange, the daughter of Dr. Louis Tutanji, a surgeon who is numbered among the founders of the Lebanese Phalangist Party, was born in 1949. In 1977 she married Bashir Gemayel, who was the son of Pierre Gemayel (the main founder and legendary leader of the Lebanese Phalangists), and who commanded the "Lebanese Forces," which were the military wing of the Phalangist movement, and was looked upon as the great promise of the Maronite community. Bashir Gemayel was also among the leading advocates of civil war by means of which he hoped to decisively defeat the Maronites' age-old and contemporary adversaries – the Druze, the Sunnis and, especially, the members of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in Lebanon. Maya, the daughter of Bashir and Solange and a victim of the civil war raging in Lebanon, was murdered in 1980 and, two years later, on 14 September 1982, Bashir was also assassinated by Syrian agents in Lebanon just two weeks after he was elected President of Lebanon (23 August) and a short time before he was to enter this office officially. Solange was left with their two children, Yumna (born in 1980) and Nadim (born 1982, shortly before his father's murder).¹³

Bashir's brother, Amine al-Gemayel, succeeded him as both the leader of the Phalangists and the "Lebanese Forces" and as President of Lebanon. Amine was married to Joyce Tyan, the daughter of Jozef Tyan, who was one of Lebanon's richest men. As it turned out, Amine was not a charismatic or effective leader and not only quickly lost control of both the "Lebanese Forces" and the Phalangists but, in the mid-1990s, when the Syrians were exercising control over Lebanon

¹³ Rima Nazih, Saydani, "Al-Sayyida alati Khasarat Zawjaha wIbnatiha waLam Tughayyiru Mawaqifuha" (the women who lost her husband and her daughter and did not change her positions), *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, September 30, 2002, <http://archive.aawsat.com/details.asp?article=127254&issueno=8707#.WcVdZmgjRnI> (accessed: June 13, 2017); Ghassan Sharbil, "Fi Hiwar ma'a Sulanj al-Jumayyil" (an interview with Solange al-Jumayyil), *al-Hayat*, August 12, 1996, http://daharchives.alhayat.com/issue_archive/Wasat%20magazine/1996/8/12/ (accessed: June 17, 2017).

with a high hand, Amine was even expelled from the Phalangist movement. Even before this, after his term as president of Lebanon ended in August 1988, Amine had gone into exile in Paris and had only returned to Lebanon near the time of the Cedar Revolution of 2005. After his return, and once he had regained control of the Phalangists, he began to transfer control of the movement to his sons - first to Pierre, who was murdered in 2006, and then to his second son, Sami.¹⁴

It was, however, Solange who sought the leadership of the Phalangists for her son, Nadim, as the one who should carry on the legacy of Bashir al-Gemayel. Since Nadim (born in 1982) was still rather young and just beginning his way, Solange decided that she herself would enter the stormy waters of Lebanese politics and did so by using her husband's memory and vociferous opposition to the Syrian presence in the country as a means to gain support. In the 2005 elections that were held in the shadow of the Cedar Revolution, Solange was elected to the Parliament with the support of the March 14th Camp headed by Sa'ad al-Din al-Hariri, the leader of Lebanon's Sunni Moslems, and the support of Walid Jumblatt, the leader of Lebanon's Druze community. She was not elected as representative of the Mount Lebanon district, which was the stronghold of the Gemayel family, but as representative of the Beirut 1 electoral district where quite a few Moslems voted for her along with Maronites. In the 2009 elections Solange did not submit her candidacy in order to clear the way for her son, Nadim who won the parliamentary seat and began taking over the leadership of the Bashir al-Gemayel faction in the Maronite Christian camp from his mother.¹⁵

Sethrida Tawk Geagea

Sethrida, who was born in May 1967, was the daughter of former Member of the Lebanese Parliament Jubran Tawk and was born in

14 "The minister of industry was assassinated", *Al-Jazeera*, November 21, 2006, <http://www.aljazeera.net/news/arabic/2006/11/21> (accessed: June 17, 2017); see also Ghassan Sa'ud, "al-Siyasiyyun wal-Aghniyya" (the politicians and the rich), *al-Akhbar*, July 30, 2015, <http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/75110>.

15 "Qata'at al-Tariq `an Amin al-Jumayyil waFaja'at Strida Ja`aja`, Sulanj al-Jumayyil Tatarashshah fi Beirut" (closing the door in front of Amin al-Jumayyil, surprising Strida Ja`aja`, Sulanj al-Jumayyil is running for a seat in Beirut), *al-Qabas*, February 2, 2005, <http://alqabas.com/111748/> (accessed: June 17, 2017).

Kumasi, Ghana. She married Samir Geagea in 1990 after which she completed a Bachelor degree in Political Science at the Lebanese American University in 1994. Samir Geagea was a military commander and later Maronite leader even though he did not come from a prominent family but gained his status by advancing up through the ranks to eventually becoming the Commander of the "Lebanese Forces" which had begun as the military wing of the Phalangist movement but later became a political party. Samir became the head of the party after the assassination of Bashir al-Gemayel in 1982, which had created a vacuum in the ranks of the leadership. At first Bashir was followed as leader of the "Lebanese Forces" by Elie Hobeika, but Samir Geagea replaced Hobeika when he was ousted in a coup because of his pro-Syrian positions, which the Maronite community opposed. In the late 1980s Samir became an important power factor in the Maronite camp and, during 1989-1990, carried on the struggle for the leadership of the community with General Michel Aoun. The signing of the Ta'if Accord, however, brought his career to a temporary end when he was arrested by the Lebanese government that had been established under Syrian auspices, and was accused of involvement in political murder and sentenced to a long prison term. The "Lebanese Forces" Party was subsequently disbanded and its supporters were scattered in all directions. In the face of all this, Samir's wife, Sethrida Tawk Geagea, hastened to take his place and kept the commitment to the man and his teachings alive, at least in his birthplace - the Jubayl and `Akkar regions, where support for him and his way remained strong.¹⁶

As previously noted, from 1994-2005 when the activities of the "Lebanese Forces" Party were banned and Sethrida's husband was in prison, it was she who ran the family's affairs. In 2005, after the Cedar Revolution of Spring 2005 and her husband's release from prison, she was elected to the Lebanese parliament as representative of the Northern 1 election district, which includes the Geagea and "Lebanese Forces" party strongholds of Batrun and Jubayl. In 2009 Sethrida was then elected as an MP from the Bishari election district,

¹⁶ See <http://whoisshe.lau.edu.lb/expert-profile/sethrida-tawk-geagea-member-parliament> (accessed: June 17, 2017).

which is also a stronghold of the “Lebanese Forces” Party. In other words, Samir Geagea preferred to remain behind the scenes and leave the work of parliamentary representation to his wife.¹⁷ The couple has no children, and it is interesting to note that Sethrida appears frequently in the gossip columns of the Lebanese press, which like to describe her as the most beautiful politician in Lebanese political life¹⁸ and emphasize the fact that Solange Gemayel’s mother is the cousin of Sethrida Tawk Geagea’s mother.

Na’ila Mu’awad

Na’ila is yet another example of a woman who entered the center of Lebanese political life following the murder of her husband, Rene Mu’awad in November 1989, just a few days after he was elected President of Lebanon following the signing of the Taif Accord. To this day it is not clear who was behind Rene Mu’awad’s assassination and it is speculated that it may have been the Syrians, who were worried about his extreme independence, or the Hezbollah organization, which thought that killing Mu’awad would sabotage the implementation of the Ta’if Accord?¹⁹

Born in 1940, Nayla Mu’awad is the daughter Najib al-Khouri, who was a Lebanese MP at one time, and the niece of MP Kablan `Isa al-Khouri. She studied French literature at Saint Joseph University and later also studied at Cambridge University. She worked as a journalist for the L’Orient newspaper until her marriage to Rene Mu’awad but, after Rene’s assassination, Na’ila was appointed to take his place in parliament and thus she became one of the first Lebanese women to serve in Lebanon’s legislature where she proved to be a skilled politician. A conspicuous fact in this connection is that she joined the Qurnat Shahwan Gathering which was a coalition of forces from the Maronite community whose aim was to oppose the Lebanese regime

17 See Sethrida’s profile in the Lebanese Forces website <https://www.lebanese-forces.com/person/politicians-sethrida-geagea/> (accessed: June 17, 2017).

18 “Fi al-Suwar, fi `Iidiha al-Hamsin... Strida Ja`ja`, Anaqa waJamal” (in her fifty anniversary, Strida Ja`ja`, beauty and elegance), *Al-Nahar*, June 1, 2017, <https://www.annahar.com/article/593954> (accessed: June 17, 2017); “Strida Ja`ja`, al-Hadith a`n Jamali Yuz`ijuni” (I am disturbed by people who speak about my look), *Gololy website*, April 8, 2012, <http://gololy.com/2012/04/08/10570/> (accessed: June 17, 2017).

19 Zisser, *The Bleeding Cedar*, pp. 106-108, 143-167. See also René Moawad Foundation website, <http://www.rmfmf.org.lb/ar> (accessed: June 17, 2017).

headed by Emile Lahoud (from 1998-2007) and, to a certain extent, Syria's hegemony in Lebanon as well. During all this Na'ila Mu'awad maintained close contact with the Syrians via her sister, Daniel, who was known to be close to the wife of Syria's vice president at the time, 'Abd al-Halim Khaddam.²⁰

Following the Cedar Revolution and the Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon, Na'ila joined the March 14th Camp headed by Sa'ad al-Din al-Hariri and Walid Jumblatt. This was a natural move since the most prominent opponent of the Mu'awad family was the Frangieh family, also from Zghorta, whose leader, Suleiman Tony Frangieh, was and remained a close ally of the Syrians. In any case, in the 2005 elections Na'ila was elected by her home district to represent it in parliament, and from 2005-2008 she served as Minister for Social Affairs in the government put together by Sa'ad al-Din al-Hariri. In the 2009 elections she refrained from running for a seat in parliament and thus cleared the way for her son, Michel, to take her place as the leader of the Mu'awad family.²¹

We note in passing that the very first woman to be elected to the Lebanese Parliament was Myrna Bustani, the daughter of the Maronite Christian Emile Bustani who, in addition to being a wealthy businessman, had also served as an MP from 1951 until his sudden death in 1963 after which a by-election was held for his parliamentary seat and his wife, Mirna, succeeded in winning it. In the following general election, however, she failed to win again and so her parliamentary career ended.²²

In recent years, people in Lebanon have begun to talk a great deal about the three daughters of Lebanon's President, General Michel Aoun, who is a Maronite Christian. Mireille, who married Roy Hash, the chairman of the Board of Directors of the OTV television channel of the Free Patriotic movement headed by Aoun, is perceived as being able to exert influence over her father. Claudine Aoun is married to Shamal Rukz, a Lebanese army officer, while President Aoun's third

²⁰ Zisser, *The Bleeding Cedar*, pp. 267-268.

²¹ Mirwan Tahtah, "Michael Mu'awad, Ana al-Awal wFaranjiyya al-Thani" (Michel Mu'awad: I am the first and Faranjiyya is the second), *al-Akhbar*, August 23, 2014, <http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/214068> (accessed: June 17, 2017).

²² Myrna Bustani profile in the Bustani's family website, <http://boustanicongress.com/fr/node/154> (accessed: June 17, 2017).

daughter, Chantal, is married to Jubran Basil, who is considered to be his father-in-law's successor since he was chosen to head the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) party after General Aoun was elected President of Lebanon in October 2016.²³ The story of General Aoun's daughters draws our attention to the abovementioned phenomenon of the politically motivated marriages that are common in the Middle East and elsewhere. These marriage arrangements are basically political tools for enabling families to gain power, form political alliances or, sometimes, even to reduce tensions and rivalries. In certain cases, however such marriages represent an attempt to preserve the cohesion of a social stratum, and perhaps the practice of members of a particular social group marrying among themselves, especially when they are on the same social and economic level, and this is to be expected.

At this point I would like to return to the aforementioned marriages that took place within the family, such as is the case in the Jumblatt family. An example of such a marriage that was intended to reduce tensions is that of Kamal Jumblatt and Amira May, daughter of Emir Shakib Arslan, which was notable because the Jumblatt and Arslan families had always been traditional rivals. The phenomenon of marriages between members of different religious communities who are, however, of the same economic and social class is also widespread in Lebanon and the earlier mentioned marriage of Taymur Jumblatt, the son of Walid Jumblatt, to Diana Zu'aytar is one such example since Taymur came from the Druze community and Diana from the Shiite Moslem community. Below we will discuss other examples of mixed marriages involving Christians, Sunni Moslems, and Shiite Moslems but this phenomenon – which in any case is not very widespread – is limited to the upper social and economic classes whose members generally feel free to marry outside the community framework if they wish. When they do participate in the events and

23 Joel Tamer, "Banat al-General, 'Aqlihi waDhira`ihi waQlabihi," (the General's daughters), *Saida online*, October 31, 2016, <http://www.saidaonline.com/news.php?go=fullnews&newsid=85093> (accessed: June 17, 2017); Claire Shukayr, "Mala'ikat Michel `Awn Miray, waClorine waShantal" (Michel `Awn's angels), *Now Lebanon* website, October 24, 2016, <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/ar/reportsfeaturesar> (accessed: June 17, 2017).

functions held in their social class, members of these classes, as a rule, do not behave as members of a particular ethnic community.²⁴

The Shiite community

The Shiite community is ostensibly the most backward and conservative in Lebanon and, in recent years, the Shiites have undergone a process of increased Islamization and, or so it seems, have become subject to the steadily increasing hegemony of the Hezbollah organization. Despite this, however, even in this community it is possible to point out several women who have played a significant political role.

Rabab al-Sadr, the sister of Musa al-Sadr, can be mentioned in this regard since she tried to fill the vacuum left by Musa's disappearance in Libya in 1978 through her attempts to preserve the cohesion of the Shiite community and the commitment to her brother's political and religious heritage. During the Israeli incursion into Lebanon in 1982 she met with Israeli figures in an effort to explore the possibility of cooperation between Israel and the Shiites and, to this day, she is active in a foundation named after her brother and works to promote his legacy and memory.²⁵

In recent decades there has been a lot of talk about Randa Berri, the second wife of Nabih Berri, Speaker of the Lebanese Parliament and head of the Shiite Amal Movement²⁶ who was first married to Layla. It is, however, Randa who heads a number of charitable societies, by means of which she has gained status for herself and her family. Nabih Berri (born in 1938) is often looked upon as having been pushed into his wife's shadow due to the energy and enterprise that have made her the strong and decisive figure in family matters, certainly in the family's financial affairs and even in matters having to do with the Amal Movement. We note that Nabih Berri's wealth is estimated at about eighty million dollars, and he is considered to be

²⁴ See also Ghassan Sa'ud, "al-Siyasiyyun wal-Aghniyya" (the politicians and the rich), *al-Akhbar*, July 30, 2015, <http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/75110> (accessed: June 7, 2017).

²⁵ Minhal al-Amin, "Rabab al-Sadr: al-Taqqawi wal-'Iman... wKhidmat al-Insan" (Rabab al-Sadr, faith and the human welfare), *al-Akhbar*, March 11, 2009, <http://al-akhbar.com/node/86988> (accessed: June 7, 2017).

²⁶ Omri Nir, *Nabih Berri and Lebanese Politics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

one of the richest politicians in Lebanon.²⁷ It is possible that his great wealth is due to his being the head of the Southern Development Authority through which government funds and donations from foreign countries are transmitted to southern Lebanon.²⁸

One should note that even Hezbollah allots a place to women in its ranks and maintains a women's organization under its auspices.²⁹ It seems, however, that, in general, Hezbollah views women in the more traditional manner and, as a traditional, male dominated collective, there is no room for women as individualists.

The Sunni community – from 'Alya al-Sulh to Bahiya al-Hariri

There are also women who have made their way into the political sphere in the Sunni community in Lebanon even if only thanks to the sponsorship of their families. These include, for example, the daughters of Riyadh al-Sulh, who was an important Sunni Moslem leader and Lebanese prime minister during the first years of the country's independence, who was married to Fa'iza al-Jabiri, of the prominent Jabiri family from Aleppo in Syria, and who was killed by an assailant in July 1951 during a visit to Jordan. The Sulh's had five daughters, three of whom are of interest in the present context: 'Aliya, Muna, and Layla.

'Aliya (1929-2007) was already known in her youth for having had a strong temperament and, in October 1951, was even suspended from her studies at the American University of Beirut for participating in a demonstration against the policies of the United States in the Middle East. 'Aliya, who almost married Prince Sultan bin Abdel-Aziz of the Saudi royal family when he was sent to console the Sulh family after Riyadh was murdered in July 1951 but did not

27 "Top 10 Richest Politician of Lebanon 2017," <https://toprichests.com/top-10-richest-politician-of-lebanon/> (accessed: June 7, 2017).

28 "Ma la Tarifun'hu an al-Sayyida Randa Barri" (What you do not know about Randa Barri), *al-Diyyar*, January 1, 2016; Claire Shukar, "Sharikat Nabi Barri wa'A'ilatihii lil-Siyasa al-Lubnaniyya" (The Barri family and Lebanese politics), *Al-Janubiyya*, August 26, 2012, <http://janoubia.com/2012/08/26/> (accessed: June 7, 2017); "Fadihat Randa barri, Hakadha Tusadaru Amwal al-Khayran wal-Waqf fi al-Janub" (Randa Barri scandal – how the money for the South and the Waqf were used), *al-Ankabout*, December 4, 2013, http://www.alankabout.com/lebanon_news/44116.html (accessed: June 7, 2017).

29 Hanin Ghaddar, "Hezbollah's Women Aren't Happy," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, October 12, 2016, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/hezbollahs-women-arent-happy> (accessed: June 7, 2017).

because of a clash in temperaments, later became a well-known journalist with a sharp pen.³⁰

'Aliya's sister, Muna (born in 1936) married the Saudi Prince Talal bin 'Abd al-'Aziz, the brother of Sultan, but divorced him in 1968 and today Muna is married to a Shiite physician Sa'ad al-As'ad, who served as Lebanon's ambassador to a number of countries and, in 2000, was elected MP as the representative of the Biqa' Valley. Muna's son, Walid bin Talal, became a well-known businessman whose wealth has been estimated at many billions of dollars. Walid invested much of his capital in Lebanon and, in the late 1990s, his name was mentioned repeatedly as a candidate for the post of prime minister.

The third sister, Layla (born in 1946), married Majid Sabri Hamada, a son of the prominent Hamada Shiite family from the Biqa' Valley. Majid's father, Sabri Hamada, served as Speaker of the Lebanese Parliament from the 1940s-1970s, until he passed away in 1976. Layla became a well-known businesswoman and even became integrated into the enterprises of her nephew, Walid bin al-Talal, in Lebanon. In October 2004, she was appointed Minister of Industry in the short-lived government of 'Umar Karami, and thus became the first Lebanese woman to be appointed to the position of minister.³¹

Also of interest in connection with the role of Sunni Moslem women in public life is the Hariri family which became important in Lebanon following the rise of Rafiq al-Hariri (born in 1944) to a leadership position. He was the eldest son of a lower middle class Sunni family from Sidon, whose father, Baha' al-Din, had started out as a farmer but left his village for the big city and began dealing in trade. Rafiq himself made his fortune in Saudi Arabia, where he established and managed a successful contracting company but, more importantly,

30 "Rahil 'Aliya'a al-Sulh al-Katiba waSayyidat al-Salun al-Siyasi" (the passing of 'Alya' al-Sulh, the writer and the women behind the political Salons), *al-Hayat*, April 27, 2007, http://daharchives.alhayat.com/issue_archive/Hayat%20INT/2007/4/27/; Faysal Khartush, "Sit al-Sitat, 'Aliya'a Riyad al-Sulh" (the lady of all ladies - 'Aliya al-Sulh), *al-Bayan*, December 12, 2014, <http://www.albayan.ae/books/from-arab-library/2014-12-12-1.2264324> (accessed: June 7, 2017); Yaqzan al-Taqqi, "Rahil 'Aliya al-Sulh" (the passing of 'Alyaa' al-Sulh), *al-Mustaqbal*, April 27, 2007, <http://www.almustaqbal.com/v4/Article.aspx?Type=np&Articleid=229507> (accessed: June 7, 2017).

31 Ashraf Mohamad, "Layla al-Sulh Hamada, min Aqwa Nisaa' al-'Alim" (Leila al-Sulh Hamada, one of the strongest women on earth), *Majla Hayatek*, March 25, 2013 <http://hayatouki.com/portraits/content/1827538> (accessed: June 7, 2017); See also Zisser, *The Bleeding Cedar*, pp. 127-129.

became a close associate of the Saudi royal family. Thanks to his ties with the royal family he became very wealthy amassing an estimated fortune of about six billion dollars. During his stay in Saudi Arabia Rafiq divorced his first wife, Nida Bustani, of Iraqi origin, whom he had met during their university studies and with whom he had three sons and married his second wife, Nazik `Uda, of Palestinian origin, in 1976.³² Nazik became the “big mother” of the family, which was testified to by Nida Bustani’s son Sa’ad al-Din al-Hariri when he revealed that he often consulted with “the mother” (“al-walida”) after his father’s death and, in reply to a question, confirmed that he meant Nazik `Uda, his stepmother.³³

Rafiq Hariri was assassinated in February 2005, apparently by members of the Hezbollah organization and was succeeded by his son, Sa’ad al-Din al-Hariri, who married Lara Bashir al-‘Azm, daughter of Bashir al-‘Azm, a businessman of Syrian origin and one of the biggest contractors operating in Saudi Arabia.³⁴

Rafiq al-Hariri’s sister, Bahiyya al-Hariri (born in 1952), should also be mentioned since she rose to the task of helping her brother and became important in protecting the family’s property. Bahiyya graduated from a ‘teachers college’ in 1970 and, in 1979, not only took over running the Hariri Foundation in Sidon that her brother Rafiq had established earlier that year but also became president of the administrative council of the Hariri-Saida foundation. These positions gave her political power among the Sunni community in Sidon, which was the stronghold of the family. In 1992 Bahiyya was elected to the Lebanese Parliament from the Sidon district as representative of the Sunni community, and has been re-elected in every election held since then. In 2008-2009 Bahiyya served as Lebanese Minister of Education.³⁵

32 Marwan Iskandar, *Rafiq Hariri and the Fate of Lebanon* (London: Saqi, 2006); see also the Hariri’s family websites <http://www.rhariri.com>; <http://hariri-foundation.org/> (accessed: June 7, 2017).

33 “Saya `tamidu `ala al-walida” (He relies of the great mother), *al-Hayat*, April 22, 2005 http://daharchives.alhayat.com/issue_archive/Hayat%20INT/2005/4/22/ (accessed: June 7, 2017).

34 See Nicholas Blanford, *Killing Mr. Lebanon: the Assassination of Rafik Hariri and its Impact on the Middle East* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2006).

35 “Al-Sira al-Dhatiyya liwazira al-Tarbiyya al-Sayyida Bahiyya al-Din al-Hariri” (the personal biography of Bahiyya al-Hariri), *Sidon-net*, July 11, 2008, <http://www.saidacity.net/news/28528> (accessed: June 7, 2017).

The Greek Orthodox community – Mirna al-Murr and Na'ila Tueni

In the Greek Orthodox Christian community Mirna el-Murr and Na'ila Tueni stand out as prominent women in public life. Mirna al-Murr and her family come from Mount Lebanon and her father Michel al-Murr served as Lebanon's Minister of the Interior, a position he later passed on to his son Elias al-Murr. Mirna's uncle, Gabriel al-Murr, is the owner of the MTV television station but Mirna's father and her uncle are involved in a long-term rivalry.

Mirna married and eventually divorced, Jubran Ghassan Tueni, editor-in-chief of the al-Nahar newspaper, who was later murdered (in 2005) in connection with his harsh criticism of Syria, but later married Jozef abu Sharaf, the son of MP Louis Abu Sharaf. In the June 2002 by-election for the parliamentary seat vacated in the northern Matn district of Mount Lebanon due to the death of MP Albert Muhaybar, Mirna decided to test the extent of her power against two other candidates who were also competing for this seat. One was Gabriel el-Murr and the other was attorney Ghassan Muhaybar, the brother of the late MP who was seeking to retain the family's hold on the parliamentary seat. Although Mirna el-Murr received the support of the central government in Beirut she quickly withdrew from the race when she realized that her chances of winning were slim. Today she serves as the mayor of Batgharin and the head of the Federation of Municipalities of the Matn district.³⁶

Na'ila Tueni (born in August 1982), who is the daughter of Jubran and Mirna al-Murrca and graduated from the Lebanese University in 2005, had already begun to work as a journalist in her father's newspaper al-Nahar in 2003 but, after her father's assassination, became al-Nahar's editor. In the 2009 elections she won the Greek Orthodox seat that had previously been held by her father in the

³⁶ Mirna al-Murr, "Sir Abiha, Ra'isat Nuwab al-Matan waBaladiyatih" (Mirna al-Murr; following her father, Mirna becomes the head of the al-Matan deputies and municipalities), *al-Akhbar*, December 5, 2014, <http://al-akhbar.com/node/221259> (accessed: June 7, 2017); See also Zisser, *The Bleeding Cedar*, pp. 225-226.

Beirut 1 electoral zone. In 2009 she married the Shiite TV broadcaster Malik Maktabi in a civil ceremony in Cyprus.³⁷

Conclusion

Throughout Lebanese history women have played active and leading roles in the public life of their country, in politics, society and the economy. This phenomenon indicates the relative vitality and dynamism of the Lebanese political system in a manner that is not characteristic of neighboring states. It must, however, be admitted that this does not represent a major breakthrough for gender equality or the abandonment of the rather narrow framework that is generally in place for women in Lebanon. First of all, in almost every case of a politically prominent woman she was, or is, filling in temporarily for her husband or some other close relative, until the next male generation of the family could, or can, take over. Second, this phenomenon has mainly been made possible by the fragmented and family-based character of Lebanese politics which means that, the phenomenon of Lebanese women being involved in politics, has, perhaps ironically, been made possible just because the system is so conservative and family connections are so decisive in every area of life. Third, even in the Lebanese context the number of women playing important roles in public life is not at all large, they are looked upon as exceptions and they are limited in their influence by the fact that they are women filling a vacancy temporarily.

The phenomenon of women playing a leading role in public affairs is most widespread and generally more possible in the Maronite Christian community. In the Druze, Shiite, and Sunni communities, on the other hand, the phenomenon manifests itself mainly as the woman filling in for a man behind the scenes. Thus, while the situation is exceptional and interesting, this does not necessarily indicate that Lebanon is very different from its neighbors. The women discussed here did not really pave their way to an influential and high status

37 Mansur al-Muzhim, "Ra'isat Tahrir al-Nahar: Ightiyal Abi Dakhakhalani lli-Siyasa" (al-Nahar's editor: the assassination of my father forced me to enter politics), July 29, 2009, http://alwatan.com.sa/Culture/News_Detail.aspx?ArticleID=144205 (accessed: June 7, 2017); "Na'ila Tuwayni marriage," *al-Arabiyya TV*, July 20, 2007, <https://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2009/07/29/80206.html> (accessed: June 7, 2017).

position. Rather, they inherited the positions of power to which they rose assisted by their family frameworks, whose main objective was, and still is, to preserve family and tribal power.

Nevertheless, the women in some of the communities in Lebanon have gone one step further than previously and that is also a phenomenon that deserves to be noted, as one of the features that characterize Lebanese society. After all, Lebanon is a state full of contrasts and contradictions, a many-faceted state and a society and state whose story is one of sharp ups and downs, as is the story of each of the ethnic communities living there. While there have been periods of stability, growth, and prosperity during which the several ethnic communities have learned to live together in relative harmony, these often alternated with periods of violent and bloody clashes. At the same time as Lebanon's story is one of relative openness, flexibility, pragmatism, and even westernization, there is also powerful conservatism that turns its gaze to the past as a source of inspiration. We leave our topic with an open question, or perhaps the answer lies in the eyes of the beholder. Are the roles played in Lebanese public and political life by the women discussed above harbingers of a breakthrough and a reduction in or removal of the age-old boundaries, or do they, ironically perhaps, serve merely as a means of keeping women locked in their traditional social roles?

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