"Finding" Sectarianism and Strife in Lebanon

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Despite Lebanon's relatively wide use as an example in studies of ethnic politics, clientelism, sectarianism, and—most recently—refugees, comparatively few articles in top political science journals are published about Lebanese politics or based on extended fieldwork in Lebanon.[1] Yet, in political science research, Lebanon is broadly represented as an area that consistently exhibits specific dynamics. Field-based scholarship on Lebanon often works to nuance this framing (see, e.g., Cammett 2014; Salloukh et al. 2015), but these works are few and far between.

Lack of contextual knowledge among both qualitatively and quantitatively oriented scholars substantiates overused categories of analyses, undermines data validity, and inhibits ethical production of knowledge. This article addresses three distinct, interrelated predicaments in the Lebanese context: (1) a generally uncritical focus on sect/sectarianism as the primary explanatory factor in Levantine politics; (2) research tourism/voyeurism; and (3) effects of these two factors on the survey-firm industry in Lebanon.

We first focus on the trap of seeing Lebanon exclusively through the prism of sect, partly because most previous work has centered on this form of identification. Second, we identify how this trend interacts with the growing valorization of "dangerous" research, which has played out in Lebanon in both the aftermath of the 2006 July War and the context of the Syrian refugee crisis. We identify problems associated with "academic tourism," including ignorance of local histories and its effects on research design and analysis. Third, we note how Lebanese actors have responded by offering survey services tailored to the foreign-researcher market and shaped by its expectations. We conclude by arguing for more careful historical contextualization, creative casing of research, responsible research practices, and critical engagement with the production of academic knowledge.

Because core political science texts often cite Lebanon as an example of sectarian fragmentation (Lijphart 1977, 147–48, 155–56) and ethnic conflict (Horowitz 1985, 3, 31, 39), it also is a telling case study in the ethics of knowledge production (Schwedler 2014). Often described using terms such as "fragmented" or simply "highly complex," Lebanon is used repeatedly to illustrate the same political phenomena. To be clear, this pattern is not limited to ethnic and sectarian politics, although it is perhaps most visible there. It also is evident in the repeated use of Hizb Allah (but not other Lebanese political parties) in studies of terrorism, rebel-to-party transition, and Islamic politics, as well as of Shatila, a Palestinian refugee camp in Beirut's southern suburbs as a site to study Palestinian refugee politics (Sukarieh and Tannock 2013).[2] The studies underscore not only the negative consequences for communities but also the way that the quality of data and validity of research decline in the wake of hundreds of researchers trekking through the same party offices and neighborhoods to interview many of the same people.

These issues affect both quantitative and qualitative research and are compounded by what Myron Weiner labeled advocacy research, "where researchers know already what they want to see and say, and as a result they end up coming away from their research having proven it" (quoted in Jacobsen and Landau 2003, 187). For example, many scholars design surveys and field experiments, structure interviews, and code datasets in ways that uncritically center sect as a necessarily relevant political identity, whereas they neglect to explore, for example, the importance of home village, party affiliation (often conflated with sect, although the two are not coterminous), leftist or rightist ideologies (Schulhofer-Wohl 2018), secularism, class, and other less-well-studied modes of identification.

In other disciplines, this trend is consistently criticized. Scholars including Majed (2016), for instance, emphasize that "saying that sectarianism is real does not imply that it is an all-encompassing explanatory variable that can be used to understand Arab societies in one go. This reductionist and often orientalist approach in explaining the Arab world does not help us grasp the complex dynamics of identity politics in the region" (see also Makdisi 2000). Yet, the authors routinely review scholarship that refers to "Christians" and "Muslims"[3] as though they are appropriate, locally resonant, unified, and immutable categories rather than externally applied labels that do not always accurately represent unified social groupings.

Our argument is not that sectarianism does not matter in Lebanese or Middle Eastern politics; it clearly does (Corstange 2016). It is that allowing the category of "sect" (which is different) to overshadow others and to drive the understanding of Lebanese politics erases other modes of affiliation, coordination, action, and identification, and it impoverishes scholarly understanding of political dynamics in the region.

This observation is particularly important because whereas it is easy to make assumptions about the role of sect on

Lebanese populations, contemporary research often challenges rather than affirms standing theory. For example, in a survey study about the relationship between violence and attitudes among individuals who survived the Lebanese Civil War, researchers found that experiences of violence, past displacement during the 1975–1990 civil war, and sect (with the exception of Shiites) all had no impact on respondents' contemporary attitudes toward hiring Syrian refugees, whereas sect did play a role in their unwillingness to host refugees

issues, specifically because they contribute to attracting more researchers who have less historical knowledge, fewer local connections, and nonexistent language skills.

There is a "narrow line between fieldwork and tourism, between scholarship and voyeurism" (Dauphinée 2007, 7–8). Researchers' lack of historical and local political knowledge has consequences. In any setting, ignorance of the local historical context and competing narratives about it can invalidate research designs. Scholars must honestly assess whether

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(Ghosn, Braithwaite, and Chu 2019). Cammett's (2014) careful parsing of the electoral dynamics that undergird segmented versus broad-based strategies in political parties' service provision and Rizkallah's (2017) examination of parties' mobilization networks—both a challenge to the "sect-all-the-way-down" view of Lebanese politics—are other good examples. In the following section, we interrogate a more general source of these issues: the labeling of Lebanon as a "dangerous" and "exotic" research locale.

RESEARCH IN "EXOTIC AREAS" AND "RESEARCH TOURISM/VOYEURISM"

Due to its history of civil war and foreign intervention; its proximity to the Syrian conflict; its role hosting Syrian, Palestinian, and Iraqi refugees; the accessibility of political and militant actors; and its location in the Eastern Mediterranean, Lebanon combines the appeal of both a "dangerous" and "exotic" locale. Scholars who undertake research in fragile contexts such as Lebanon often reap professional benefits (Lake and Parkinson 2017). However, this trend has led individuals to embark on fieldwork in unfamiliar areas, to place local research assistants and fixers at risk (Cronin-Furman and Lake 2018), and to levy unfair and often offensive demands on local academics (Abaza 2011).

Despite its construction as a "dangerous site," we both believe that Lebanon is a comparatively safe place for skilled researchers. Perhaps the greatest current research risk in Lebanon is to potential participants and facilitators; as Sukarieh and Tannock (2013) emphasize, over-research in Shatila has led to exhaustion, frustration, and feelings of exploitation. The push for research in "exotic areas" also has led to concerns of "research tourism/voyeurism," perhaps best embodied in a researcher who visits for two weeks and then posts selfies with Syrian refugee children on social media while claiming regional expertise. Efforts to create a market for research services in Lebanon have compounded these

individuals "might (consciously or unconsciously) be reluctant or afraid to tell researchers their true views, or they might wish to promote a particular vision of their suffering. Their response could be part of their survival strategy" (Jacobsen and Landau 2003, 192). They also must be careful of basing analyses on preliminary impressions, overemphasizing media narratives, and presenting politically or historically loaded statements as fact. For example, in Parkinson's (2013; 2016) research, group interviews and ethnographic encounters with new interlocutors, particularly men, often began with someone stating that the Lebanese Civil War was between Muslims and Christians—only to be immediately corrected by another longer-term participant elaborating his analysis of the role of leftists and rightists, socioeconomic class, corruption among political elites, and foreign meddling. Generating long-term, trust-based relationships was essential to getting past many interlocutors' "stock responses" to researchers and journalists, particularly those who they believed had not bothered to learn history. Instead, working through these intersecting cleavages aided Parkinson in developing questions that subsequently uncovered, for example, the role of cross-confessional brokerage in militant parties' evolution (Parkinson 2013) and narratives regarding financial wrongdoing among elites (Parkinson 2016).

Researchers with deep case knowledge are more able to situate events and issues in broader contexts, gain analytical leverage via creative siting choices, ask more interesting and effective interview questions, design more incisive survey questions, and develop a deeper understanding of the topics studied. The next section addresses another set of considerations for budding Lebanon scholars: the emergence of a market for research assistance and survey enumeration.

LOCAL INDUSTRY FOR RESEARCH

The influx of Syrian refugees since 2011 has elevated Lebanon's status as a popular destination for researchers. In one tiny

country, a researcher can "hit" multiple analytic "birds with one stone" using the Syrian case: migration, sectarianism, dignity, ideology, identity, and mobilization, to name only a few. The influx of research money from the Global North and the deployment of topical rather than regional expertise have created incentives for the emergence of a local industry for research—as well as perverse incentives and sometimes exploitative practices.

same information. However, the researcher would not compromise, insisting that the option be included in its initial form. In the end, the enumerators never verbally presented the option in the field due to the personal risk it would pose.

CONCLUSION

Assumptions are easy to make and interact in often-perverse ways with disciplinary structures. To properly conduct

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Because surveys are currently "hot," there is demand for local firms that can conduct large surveys. In response to financial flows, firms that previously focused on product marketing have reoriented their business focus to political, economic, and social issues. However, this pivot often brings ethical quandaries to the surface: many of these firms' employees do not have human-subjects training and are generally unfamiliar with ethical issues that may arise while working with vulnerable populations. Researchers also must ensure that mechanisms are in place to ensure data quality and validity, starting by gathering as much information as possible from various sources. For instance, they can consult authors who have already published survey work from a country in addition to researching which firms that local and international organizations partner with for their own reports.

Local reputation also should figure heavily. In the case of Lebanon, one firm was particularly popular with foreign researchers because it presented as a professional firm with highly educated individuals who spoke fluent English. However, when Ghosn spoke to local researchers and colleagues in Lebanon, she learned that the firm was known for falsifying data. As a result, many local researchers and institutions avoided the firm. Other survey firms were known to bid low to get the job and then outsource it cheaply to smaller firms. This led to falsified data because individuals in the subcontracted firms were not paid enough to travel nationally to conduct the survey. Ghosn also discovered that yet another firm had tried to market itself to a Western researcher by claiming it was the only survey company that could access Hizb Allah–controlled areas. However, anyone familiar with Lebanon's complicated political and security dynamics knows that studying Hizb Allah is never a straightforward proposition. There are several areas where even highly connected locals would have difficulty due to their own security concerns.

In other cases, lack of local experience led to tension between researchers and survey firms. For example, a Lebanon-based colleague shared that a foreign researcher wanted the option of "transgender" to appear on a national survey. The firm and other local researchers indicated that it would be culturally inappropriate for the enumerators to ask in the straightforward way proposed. They encouraged the researcher to consider other approaches to generating the

research requires intellectual, financial, and temporal investment. The drive for unique data, the valuation of "cutting-edge methodologies," the deemphasis of region-specific knowledge, a ticking tenure clock, and the need to complete fieldwork quickly due to limited funding all combine in ways that force researchers to simplify where possible. These issues become particularly acute in areas such as Lebanon, where easy access and extant research frames intermix with perceptions of danger and exoticness to attract researchers looking to establish their reputation.

Fujii (2012) called on researchers to remember "that to enter another's world as a researcher is a privilege, not a right." To be sure, numerous scholars have conducted meaningful research in Lebanon with skill, care, and scholarly justification. Future researchers should follow their example of long-term commitment to understanding local context; parsing less-noticed political processes; examining understudied locales, parties, and populations; and loyally representing complicated, often contradictory political dynamics. Newer researchers should carefully assess why they are choosing their topics and methodologies, what the risks—to themselves and to their participants—may be, to what extent their project is truly unique and meaningful, and the extent of the burdens they will place on local communities. When conducting survey research specifically, researchers should request a firm's Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative certificate, ensure that it is working with tablets accessible to the primary investigator, confirm that enumerators are actually visiting the locations to which they claim they are going, and check the data before completing the survey to certify the data quality.

"Some ethical questions are obvious, such as 'do no harm.' But when the effects of our research are less immediately transparent, what are the boundaries of our obligations?" (Schwedler 2014). Journal editors and reviewers also can disincentivize analytically problematic and unethical research practices by selecting reviewers with area expertise; constructively challenging essentialist units of analysis; asking questions about a researcher's length of time in the field, language skills, ethical procedures, and choice of research sites; and probing how researchers choose and use local research assistants and survey firms. This article is, in part, a call for all of

us to be good researchers in addition to doing good research and to be conscious of the questions we ask, the biases we carry, the way we conduct our research, and the conclusions we draw—not only in Lebanon but also across regions of the world. ■

NOTES

1. In the past five years, *American Political Science Review* (*APSR*), *American Journal of Political Science* (*AJPS*), *British Journal of Political Science* (*BJPS*), *International Security* (*IS*), *Perspectives on Politics*, and *Comparative Political Studies* (*CPS*) each have published one article based on Lebanese politics or sited in Lebanon; *Journal of Politics* (*JOP*) and *Journal of Conflict Resolution* (*JCR*) have published two. By comparison, Uganda was the single-country case in at least three *APSR* issues; three *International Organization* issues; two each in *AJPS*, *BJPS*, and *Journal of Peace Research*; and one each in *CPS* and *World Politics*. In each case, many of the citations were driven by a single scholar. The ability to conduct quantitative research in English almost certainly influences this distinction.

2. Amazon lists more than 12 books written on Hizb Allah in the past 10 years but none written on its predominantly Shi'a but more secular-leaning March 8 coalition partner, Amal.

3. This division is reflected by canonical scholars such as Lijphart (1977, 147), who divided Lebanon's 18 recognized confessions into "two groups of sects, Christian and Moslem." For the purposes of governmental representation, the Lebanese state recognizes 18 doctrinal groups. For example, there are four recognized Muslim sects: Sunni, (Twelver) Shi'a, Alawi, and Ishma'ili. The Lebanese state recognizes Druze doctrine and communities separately.

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