

RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY AND SECTARIANISM IN LEBANON

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Lebanese religious leaders are often treated as authentic representatives of their sects and are given broad powers over religious affairs. However, their leadership is not organic, nor are they necessarily popular, as these individuals are trained and selected by elite institutions. These figures do not incite sectarian hatred, and even aim to reduce it, but the way they are empowered and their monopoly on spiritual matters inhibit social integration among various religious communities and reinforce sectarian divisions.

The Complex Role of Lebanese Religious Leaders

- Religious leadership is inherently ambiguous, combining two roles: that of spiritual authorities on matters of religious doctrine and behavior, and that of public spokesmen for broader religious communities.
- Lebanon's political system institutionalizes the representation of various religious sects and grants their leaders broad powers over religious affairs, including personal-status courts, wealthy endowments, places of worship, education, and the centralized employment of clerics.
- Religious leaders do not exist in isolation from politics. They are products of and selected by elite institutions, not by popular mandate. These figures often are not truly representative of their presumed constituents, who are not religiously bound to follow them.
- Despite this, foreign diplomats and political leaders in neighboring countries increasingly view religious leaders as representative interlocutors when engaging sectarian constituencies in divided societies.

The Mixed Impact of Lebanese Religious Leaders on Sectarianism

- Lebanese religious leaders do not incite sectarian hatred. They are invested in coexisting within and preserving the political system that confers their power.
- In some respects, religious representatives are well-placed to defuse sectarian tension. They tend to publically oppose the politicization of sectarian divisions, and can be instrumental in deradicalization.
- But the way Lebanon recognizes and empowers exclusivist religious leaders also exacerbates the country's difficulty in faithfully representing its religious diversity. These leaders promote narrow orthodoxies that marginalize and at times radicalize nonconformists such as Islamists or secularists.
- Religious leaders help perpetuate a sectarian system that inhibits social integration and has suppressed the representation of diversity rather than improved it. Their monopoly over religious affairs maintains divisions between citizens and confines them to communally bound lives.

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