# OTTOMAN 'MULTICULTURALISM'?
# The Example of the Confessional System in Lebanon

A lecture given by

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The fall of the Ottoman Empire spawned a variety of attempts to solve the task of integrating a culturally heterogeneous people while at the same time establishing a modern political system. These efforts span from unitary nation-states, intolerant in ethnic and religious terms such as Turkey, Bulgaria and Greece, to consociational systems such as Lebanon. As far as the reconciliation of the interests of different ethnic and religious groups and/or the assimilation of minorities and the settling of differences and disputes is concerned, the merits of both strategies remain quite limited. Recent bloodshed and unresolved tensions have demonstrated that Lebanon and other states need to open up new channels for political participation, find new modes of political representation, and create new common denominators.

This paper wants to draw attention to the fact that Lebanese political debate almost completely ignores how its consociationalist system came about in the 19th century.[1] I will not argue that Lebanon has to return to its 'roots' – a somewhat purified and chastened consociationalism of a golden age. Yet, a look back into the Ottoman past might give some important clues on the present political culture in Lebanon.

After a short discussion of the Ottoman *millet* system in the first section, I will give in the second chapter an outline of Lebanon´s recent history. The third chapter will deal with the concept of multiculturalism and its potential compatibility with the *millet* system: to what extent can the *millet* system serve as a model or prototype for a modern concept of multiculturalism? Or, to pose the question in a more general sense: What, if anything, does the

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*millet* system have in common with multiculturalism? The fourth chapter will be devoted to a short comparison between the political debate in Lebanon and Turkey. The Lebanese political and intellectual debate does (to my knowledge) – in stark contrast to Turkey – recur neither to the *millet* nor to multiculturalism. Yet, to analyze the discussion (or non-dis- cussion) of the *millet* will give important clues to underlying political visions both in Turkey and Lebanon. In the fifth and final section I will discuss the pros and cons of using – or not using – the concepts of multiculturalism and *millet* as a reference point in the Lebanese public debate. As will become evident in the next sections, I am convinced that the historical experience of the *millet* system, or even its ideal concept, cannot contribute to the creation of a multiculturalist society.

## 1. The survival of non-Muslim communities and the *millet* system as a set of rules and practices

To a certain extent non-Muslims under Ottoman rule enjoyed religious (including cultural and educational) and juridical autonomy. The set of regulations and governmental practices shaping the relation of the Ottoman Empire's ruling Muslim class with its non-Muslim subjects is commonly referred to as the *millet* system.

The *millet* system of the Ottoman Empire is considered to be derived from an extension of the Islamic notion of *dhimma*, which was applied in different ways and to varying degrees by many Islamic polities. The *dhimma* can be characterized as a contract through which the Islamic community granted the members of the 'people of the Book' (at first only Jews and Christians) protection and the right to practice their religion, under the condition that they recognized Islamic sovereignty. The more

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specific origin of the Ottoman *millet* system probably lies in the Balkan areas – as a means to deal with the mosaic of ethnic groups and religions of the Balkan Peninsula. The *millet* system seems to have been a suitable response to these conditions. In the classical period of the Ottoman Empire only four *millet*s existed. At the top was the Islamic *millet* as the ruling *millet (millet-i ḥākime)*. Ranked respectively second and third were the two Christian *millet*s: the Greek Orthodox and the Armenian. In fourth place was the Jewish *millet*. In the course of the 19th century a large number of additional *millet*s were established.

In early Ottoman times the term *millet* was used mainly for the Islamic community – the *umma*; non-Muslim communities were referred to as *ṭā'ife, jemā'at, gebrān* or *dhimmī*. Later, the term *millet* was extended to non-Muslim communities, and eventually came to refer to them exclusively. The source of this change in meaning is probably to be found in the 19th century when the term, misinterpreted by European Orientalists, was re-introduced to the Ottoman Empire.[2] The *millet*s were quasi-autonomous units which performed functions in legislative, judicial, fiscal, religious and charitable affairs and were responsible for educating their members. Until 1878 the Ottoman state corresponded with the *millet* leaderships by way of the Foreign Ministry.[3] The *millet* system allowed individual communities to re-

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[2]  Benjamin Braude, 'Foundation Myths of the *Millet* System', in: *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire. The Functioning of a Plural Society*, eds. Benjamin Braude and Bernard Lewis, New York: Holmes and Meier 1982, 72; but see Michael Ursinus, art. 'Millet', in: *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, new ed., vol. 7, Leiden: Brill 1993, 62f, who sees the change of meaning already setting in with the 17th century in the attempt to ward off European missionary activities.

[3]  Roderic Davison, 'Nationalism as an Ottoman Problem and the Ottoman Response' in: *Nationalism in a Non-National State. The Disso-*

tain their local ethnic and linguistic distinctiveness, and thus produced a system of 'religious universality and local parochialism'. It was universal in the sense that a specific church in the Ottoman Empire was seen as an entity. It was limited because each religious group at a given place defined itself as a unit and related primarily to members of its own group. The *millet* system was thus a socio-cultural and communitarian form of organization which was based primarily on sectarian identity, and only secondarily on linguistic and ethnic features.[4]

Nonetheless, critics rightly charge that the term *millet* falsely suggests an unchanging phenomenon which endured throughout the centuries. The term has for this reason been labelled as an 'historical fetish' plaguing the historiography of the last hundred years.[5] Indeed, in today's usage the term suggests an administrative and technical concreteness which, in the face of large regional and temporal differences, could never really have been. In point of fact, a consistent designation or organization for the various non-Muslim communities scattered throughout the Empire does not seem to have existed until the 19th century.

*lution of the Ottoman Empire*, eds. William Haddad and William Ochsenwald, Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University Press 1977, 33-37.

4 Kemal Karpat, 'Millets and Nationality: The Roots of Incongruity of Nation and State in the Post-Ottoman Era', in: Braude and Lewis, *Christians and* Jews, 141ff, citation on 147.

5 Braude, *Foundation Myths*, 72ff.

## 2. The *milletsiz* Lebanese political debate[6]

The 'First Republic' in Lebanon was founded in November 1941, when France, the acting mandate power, declared Lebanese independence. Lebanon as a state had already come into existence on the 1st of September, 1920, when 'Greater Lebanon' (*Grand Liban*) was proclaimed by the French mandate power. The core of Greater Lebanon was Mount Lebanon (*Mont Liban*), inhabited mainly by the tribally organized Maronites and Druzes, with the Maronites spread throughout and the Druzes in the southern and middle regions. In the 19th century Mount Lebanon was already an area 'with inherent attributes making of it a unique social rather than political phenomenon in Syria and the broader Arab world.'[7] This was not the case with Greater Lebanon, since the areas added to Mount Lebanon were of a very diverse cultural orientation and ethnic composition. The main additions were a large number of urbanized Sunnis, located on the coastal strip, and Shiites, living in the Jabal Amil (Southern Lebanon) and the Bekaa valley.

In the national pact of 1943 forged by representatives of the two dominant groups of that time, the Maronite and Sunni elite, the Maronites pledged that they would not seek closer ties with the West, while the Muslims forfeited any aspirations to a union with a possible greater Arab State. Under the terms of the pact Lebanon was to be a state with 'an Arab face and Arab lan-

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[6]  The Turkish suffix -*siz* is added to nouns to form adjectives meaning 'without', 'less'. *Siz* together with *çi, li* and *lik* is possibly the only Turkish element in Arabic vernaculars which is still productive.

[7]  Kemal Salibi, *A House of Many Mansions: The History of Lebanon Reconsidered*, London: Tauris 1988, 164.

guage', while maintaining a 'special nature'. The special nature of Lebanon springs from the multitude of its confessional groups and the high percentage of non-Muslims.[8] Six confessional groups are of greater political significance, among them three Muslim communities: the Sunnis, the Shiites, and the Druzes. The other three are Christian: the Maronites, the Greek Ortho-dox, and the Greek Catholic.

## 2.1. Political Confessionalism in the First Republic

The pact also reconfirmed the principle of political confession-alism and consociationalist democracy in Lebanon. In the Leba-nese confessionalist system confessional groups, and not parties, were (and still are) acknowledged as the main actors in the po-litical arena. Whereas the term 'political confessionalism' is mostly used with a negative connotation to depict the whole of the political culture of Lebanon, hinting at its deep-rooted clien-tism, the term 'consociationalism' designates in a more specific way the mechanisms of conflict resolution and interest balancing in a multi-confessional society. Gerhard Lehmbruch coined the term 'proportional democracy' to describe historically grown mechanisms of accommodating political conflict, as in Switzer-land, for example. Arend Lijphart adopted this theory, naming it 'consociationalism' by borrowing Johannes Althusius' *conso-ciatio* ('community of common destiny, cooperative'), and ap-

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[8]    The arrêt number 60 of 1936 officially accepted 17 communities. 11 of these are Christian: Maronite, Greek-Orthodox, Greek-Catholic, Armenian-Orthodox, Armenian-Catholic, Syrian-Orthodox, Syrian-Catholic, Assyro-Chaldean (Nestorian), Chaldean, Latin, Protestant. Five are Muslim: Sunnite, Shiite, Druze, Alawite, Ismailite. The sev-enteenth community is the Jewish. See Antoine Nasri Messarra, *Théorie générale du système politique libanais,* Paris: Cariscript 1994, 26. In 1995 the Copts were admitted as the 18th community.

plying it to societies which are 'divided by segmental cleavages and which follow concern lines of objective social differentiation'.[9]

Political confessionalism and its concomitant procedures, such as proportional representation in government service or parliament, are ideologically based on the concept of a syncretic nationalism. Syncretic nationalism aims to unify varying cultural, ethnic and religious groups under the umbrella of a common nation.[10] While the different groups have the right to articulate and represent their group interests in the political arena, they also see themselves as part of a larger community, Lebanon. The concept of syncretic nationalism displays obviously idealistic traits. It requires the acknowledgment of all the participating groups that inter-confessional conflicts may not exceed a certain limit, and that they all ultimately share the common nation of Lebanon. Quite a few Christian and Muslim groups fostered such a 'benevolent' Lebanese patriotism. For example, the Chaldean banker Michel Chiha expounded the functionalist conception of Lebanon's *raison d'être* as a 'merchant republic.'[11] Lebanese patriotism thus showed a curious similarity to the failed concept of 'Ottomanism' propagated as an official state nationalism in the late Ottoman period. Both were intended to bridge religious, ethnic and political rifts, and both were lacking emotional appeal.

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[9] Arend Ljiphart, *Democracy in Plural Societies. A Comparative Exploration*. New Haven 1977, 3.

[10] Theodor Hanf, *Coexistence in Wartime Lebanon. Decline of a State and Rise of a Nation,* London 1993, 29, fn. 50; see also Nawaf Kabbara, 'Critique of the Lebanese Theory of Consociational Democracy', in: *Reconstruire Beyrouth. Les paris sur le possible*, Lyon: Maison de l'Orient Méditerranéen 1991, 345.

[11] See Hanf, *Coexistence,* 70.

Nonetheless, the reality in Lebanon was always a different story. Maronites profited greatly from a distorted ratio of representation because the power allotments were based on numbers derived from a census conducted in the 1930's, out-of-date in the later decades. The Maronites, in a way the *millet-i ḥākime* in the first Lebanese republic, propagated a kind of 'domi-nationalism', trying to legitimize the Maronites' predominance.[12]

## 2.2. Political Confessionalism after 1990

In August and September 1990, the Lebanese parliament constitutionalized the agreement of Taif *(wathiqat al-wifāq al-waṭanī)*. It had been hammered out in October 1989, by those Lebanese parliamentarians who remained from the last elections in 1972. In October 1990, Syrian forces attacked the Presidential Palace in Baabda on the outskirts of Beirut, and overwhelmed the last defenses of those units of the Lebanese army that had remained faithful to its commander, the general-major Michel Aoun, who had asserted to be the acting President. The 'uncivil war' that had started in 1975 came to an end, and the 'Second Republic of Lebanon' was born.

In the Second Republic of Lebanon there seem to be three positions with regard to the problem of confessionalism. The first is the pragmatic approach, that of 'muddling through'. Although one of the avowed aims of the new Lebanese Republic was to repress political denominationalism, seen as a major cause of the outbreak of the civil war and the collapse of the political system, the Taif agreement and the preamble to the Constitution of 1990

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[12]  A late 'dominationalist' example is the grim book of Walid Phares, *Lebanese Christian Nationalism. The Rise and Fall of an Ethnic Resistance*, Boulder, London: Lynne Rienner 1995.

take a rather ambiguous stance. They expressed an avowed commitment to the gradual and careful deconfessionalization of the political system in Lebanon, [13] but nonetheless the political game was carried on with the old 1943 consociationalist model, not touching its foundations.[14]

Many of those who point to the insurmountable difficulties of deconfessionalization are suspect in their commitment to the common cause. George Sa'adeh of the Maronite Kataib argued very ambiguously that political deconfessionalization is not possible without a very long process of changing the whole structure of confessionalism, implying that this is not possible at all.[15] Nabih Berri, Speaker of Parliament and leader of the Shiite Amal, excused his practice of appointing Shiites to positions within his reach. He pointed out that as long as the confessionalist system has a firm hold on Lebanon, Maronites, Sunnis, etc. will capitalize on this system. Berri justified his practice with the hypocritical argument that he wants to illustrate by his confessionalist policy the dangers of confessionalism.[16]

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[13] Paragraph (h) of the preamble to the constitution of 1990 rules that 'the suppression of political confessionalism is a primary political objective that shall be realized according to a gradual plan.'

[14] See for critiques of this laxness: Ilyās Sābā, 'Al-Azma al-lubnānīya .... ilā ayn?', Al-Mustaqbal al-ʿarabī 135 (1990), 98; Najjāḥ Wākīm 45-48, Ḥusayn al-Quwwatlī 52, Tawfīq Hindī 66, Ḥusayn Kanʿān 82f., all in: Lubnān wa-āfāq al-mustaqbal, Beirut: Centre for Arab Unity Studies / Markaz dirāsāt al-waḥda al-ʿarabīya 1991; Ghassan Salamé, 'Small is Pluralistic: Democracy as an Instrument of Civil Peace', in: Democracy without Democrats? The Renewal of Politics in the Muslim World, ed. Ghassan Salamé, London: Tauris 1994, 105.

[15] Al-Nahār, 19.11.1993, 5.

[16] Al-Nahār, 28.2.1995, 3.

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In Lebanon, there are two different proposals of a more thoughtful way to find a solution. One of them is the way of comprehensive laicism, as proposed by Salim Hoss, the former and present Prime Minister. According to Hoss, the *ṭāʾifīya*, the confessionalist system, has become an illness which rages in the souls of the Lebanese. One of the most important tasks of the state should be to help the Lebanese to liberate themselves from this evil by investing the utmost effort to develop the country. 'What else is the *ṭāʾifīya*,' he asks, 'but the symbol of ignorance and backwardness amongst the people?' The *ṭāʾifīya* can therefore be overwhelmed only through a continuous and steady process. Hoss's stance seems very compatible with the concept of constitutional patriotism. He has explicitly referred to the example of the United States, seeing its citizens' loyalty to the constitution as the cohesive force of its polity.[17]

The other suggested remedy is the old idea of a 'benevolent' patriotic confessionalist system, upheld even in the last few years. This notion accepts the reality of a deeply-rooted confessional structure in Lebanese society, and tries to transform it into a purified and chastened confessionalist system based on strong patriotism and reverence of common Lebanese values. This stance was propagated for example by the multi-confessional 'Permanent Council for Lebanese Dialogue' (Al-*Muʾtamar al-dāʾim li-l-ḥiwār al-lubnānī*) and its journal, *Dialogue Papers* (Awrāq *al-ḥiwār*). In a joint declaration, published in *Dialogue Papers* in 1995, the council said that both democracy and patriotism *(waṭanīya)* are based on the pluri-confessional structure of Lebanon, and that neither can replace it.

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[17]   Al-Nahār, 9.4.1994.

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But how can anyone guarantee that such a sublimated confessionalism will ever be safe from the diverse egotisms and machinations that exploit the potential of different confessional identities? As the stress lies here on the national unity of the Lebanese, and not on a common democratic political system, the democratic commitment of some of these positions is somehow unclear.

The opponents of political confessionalism correctly declare that this system transforms conflicts which are not religious in and of themselves into religious conflicts.[18] However, as experience since 1990 has shown, the confessional system is amazingly tenacious. This is due in part to the fact that the abolition, or at least the reduction, of confessionalism depends on the approval of the confessional groups themselves – a concerted voluntary self-disbanding and a so-to-speak last major act of confessionalism.

So how to account for the longevity and deep-seatedness of confessionalism? Many political scientists explain the rise and the tenacity of confessionalism only in the context of Lebanese history after 1920. This might be due to Lebanese self-esteem and the desire to draw a clear line between themselves and the Ottomans. For example, even in the papers of the Permanent Council for Lebanese Dialogue no reference to the Ottoman past can be found.

There are also theories deserving consideration which explain political confessionalism solely in terms of twentieth-century

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[18]  Kabbara, *Critique*, 360; see also Volker Perthes, *Der Libanon nach dem Bürgerkrieg. Von Ta'if zum gesellschaftlichen Konsens?*, Baden-Baden: Nomos 1994, 132.

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history. The well-known political scientist Ghassan Salamé has proposed the hypothesis that Lebanese proportional democracy owes its existence to the calculations of the dominant but not absolutely dominating Maronites in the 1920s, that alone, without the participation of other religious groups, they would not be able to retain power.[19] What speaks against Salamé's argument is the fact that the end of the civil war sounded the knell of Maronite dominance without bringing down political confessionalism. Another objection to Salame's theory is that the foundations of confessionalism are discernible prior to the establishment of the Republic. If we assume that it is not solely the deep-rootedness and ensuing indispensability of the confessionalist system which make it so omnipresent in Lebanese political life, what is it then? To answer this question, let us look back, beyond the confines of modern Lebanon.

## 2.3. A Look back into the 19th Century

One of the rare exceptions in the Lebanese political debate who stresses the historical roots of confessionalism is Antoine Nasri Messarra. He argues that political confessionalism is a genuine legacy of Ottoman rule, and even dates back to the Mamluk era. Confessionalism being so deeply rooted in Lebanon, the country is condemned to a system of a sectarian-representational democracy whether it likes it or not.[20] However, Messarra is a rigid ad-

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[19] Salamé, *Small is Pluralistic*, 86, 97.

[20] Messarra, *Système politique libanais*, 21; see also his 'Les chances de survie du système consociatif libanais. D'une consociation sauvage ... à un modèle consociatif rationalis', in: *La Société de Concordance*, eds. Theodor Hanf, Antoine Nasri Messarra and Hinrich Reinstrom, Beirut: L'Université Libanaise 1986, 107 and his *Le pacte libanais. Le message d'universalité et ses contraintes*, Beirut 1997, 152ff.

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vocate of political confessionalism and his historical analysis is not based on the presentation of factual evidence.

As mentioned earlier, Lebanon was and is profoundly affected by the presence of a large number of religious groups. Can we therefore trace political confessionalism in Lebanon directly to the *millet* system which should have existed in Ottoman times? Such direct causality is very unlikely. For one thing, the Ottoman state propagating Hanefite 'orthodoxy' did not easily recognize a large number of religious groups in Lebanon, especially Islamic heterodox groups such as the Shiites, the Druzes, and the Alawites. Mount Lebanon was not one of the core areas of the Ottoman Empire. From the beginning of Ottoman rule in the early 16th century until the middle of the 19th century, Mount Lebanon was only indirectly controlled, and left to the rule of local dynasties. In the middle of the 19th century the status of Mount Lebanon was decisively changed. Until this time the area had been only a part of one or more Ottoman provinces. In 1842, however, two provinces were created: one in the northern part of Mount Lebanon under a Christian *kaymakam*, and one in the southern part under a Druze *kaymakam*. In 1861, both provinces were consolidated into one *mutasarriflik*, a semi-autonomous province. These steps were taken in response to unrest and massacres which had occurred along religious boundaries (Druzes against Maronites), but which had a strong socio-economic motivation.

The results of this development were double-edged. On the one hand, more than 300 years of relative autonomy ended when the Ottoman state eliminated local centers of power. On the other hand, a new kind of relative autonomy was institutionalized. At the same time the beginnings of the representational system of the religious groups can be detected. In 1845, a council consisting of one member of each denomination, Sunni, Maronite,

Druze, Greek Orthodox, and Greek Catholic, was assigned to the governors of both provinces. When the unified province of Mount Lebanon was created, the institution of a representative council was continued. Some time later the council came to be constituted on the basis of a demographically proportional distribution of seats.

It is obvious then, that the origin of the confessional system of Lebanon goes back to this era. The *Règlement Organique* of 1861/1864 betrays the strong influence of European concepts such as political participation. European pressure and influence on the Ottoman Empire were obvious in all the reforms undertaken to pacify Mount Lebanon. It is astonishing that historical research has not yet clarified to what extent the confessional system owes its existence to a genuine Lebanese tradition of power brokerage, to Ottoman statecraft and constitutional thought, and to the influence of European conceptions.[21]

What seems to be clear however, is that this system of administration can hardly be considered a manifestation of the Ottoman *millet* system itself. Lebanon's intricate election system, also stemming from the 19th century, is almost the opposite of the

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[21] Leila T. Fawaz explains in her monograph *An Occasion for War: Civil Conflict in Lebanon and Damascus in 1860*, Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press 1994, the term *millet* shortly on 275, footnote 25, but leaves it unclear whether this passage refers to Lebanon specifically. See also Elizabeth Picard, *Lebanon: A Shattered Country. Myths and Realities of the Wars in Lebanon,* New York, London: Holmes and Meier 1996, XI, 10, 21f, 64, who sways forth and back between the interpretation of confessionalism either as an Ottoman heritage and or as an European introjection into Lebanon; Engin D. Akarlı, *The Long Peace: Ottoman Lebanon 1861-1920*, Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press 1993, 25, points to genuine Lebanese roots of confessionalism. but does not evaluate their contribution to the system set up later.

'ideal' of the *millet* system. According to Clifford Geertz, the Lebanese election system, which has remain unchanged in its basic traits until today, 'acts to align certain leaders from the various sects over against certain other such leaders in such a way that political ties tend to cross-cut sectarian ones.'[22] Instead of a compartmentalised society in which each of the '*millets*' deals happily and unhampered with its own affairs Mount Lebanon of the 19th century reveals a more complex picture.

## 3. Multiculturalism versus the *millet* system

In the light of these historical facts it would be very doubtful whether the historical experience of the *millet* system (indeed is there one?) offers a solution for the dilemmas of modern-day Lebanon. Is it conceivable that by drawing on the positive aspects of the *millet* system, the degenerate political confessionalism might reform itself in such a way as would enable it to become a liberal and democratic force in a multicultural state? Perhaps we should first turn our attention to the question whether the *millet* system can serve as a model or even a prototype of multiculturalism at all.

At first glance there appears to be some correspondence between the *millet* system and the concept of multiculturalism. Very generally, multiculturalism demands that all religious or cultural groups are fundamentally equal and are recognized as such. All groups should have the right to the unrestrained development of their cultural and religious lives, and the state should protect these groups and assure their ability to survive.

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[22] Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Culture: Selected Essays,* New York: Basic Books 1973, 294, cited after Akarlı, *The Long Peace,* 190.

Did not the *millet* system accomplish just that? In my opinion, this assumption must be definitively denied. The *millet* system was first of all, like any political and social system, a system of rule intended to lead to optimal results using the fewest possible means. Moral or humanitarian concerns, if at all present, were only of secondary importance. The concept of tolerance in its current Western definition was unknown to either pre-modern Christian or Muslim states. The Ottoman *millet* system may have granted to religious groups autonomy in religious and certain judicial affairs, but always in the context of Ottoman rule and the dominance of the Islamic *umma*. Moreover, the *millet* system was not interested in a liberal, open form of rule within the semi-autonomous *millets*. The concept of multiculturalism, on the other hand, always involves convictions about what societies should or should not be. Multiculturalism assumes the equality of diverse ethnic or religious groups in a constitutional state which protects this principle. Protection of the individual in this concept has precedence over the protection of the group. Only insofar as the inviolable basic rights of the individual are not harmed can a group actively pursue its cultural interests.[23] The Ottoman *millet* system and multiculturalism are for that reason systems which are not at all compatible. This is one important point.

The other point is that it might be helpful to take a closer look at the Ottoman *millet* system in order to perceive the historical relativity of phenomena which today are often regarded as unalterable entities. Nationalism, for example, which has been a dominant ideology of the last few decades all over the world,

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[23] See for an extensive discussion of multiculturalism: Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism and the Politics of Recognition*. With commentaries by Amy Gutmann, Steven C. Rockefeller, Michael Walzer and Susan Wolf, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1992.

should not necessarily be viewed as the only possible organizing principle of large communal associations.

# 4. Turkish Paramnesia and Lebanese Amnesia

Israel, Turkey, and Lebanon each often claim to be the only working democracy in the Middle East. But like Israel and Turkey, Lebanon has failed to establish a set of political mechanisms able to integrate a religiously and ethnically mixed population without provoking violence along ethnic and religious lines. As a result of this failure, Lebanon has experienced the trauma of pointless wars without actual winners, wars that could not give birth to fundamental solutions. Being well aware of all the differences between Turkey and Lebanon I would nevertheless like to compare – in a short digression – the discussion of the millet system in in these two states.

Lebanon and Turkey are only rarely mentioned together. In contrast to the Bosnian case, and despite the geographical proximity and centuries-long common history of the two countries, in Turkey neither the state nor the society were deeply emotionally involved in the long-lasting Lebanese civil war.[24] The political and juridical systems of these two countries could not be more opposite, and in fact represent two extremely different models for coping with cultural differences in the population. Lebanon's political structure is multi-confessional while Turkey's is unitary.

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[24] The civil war in Lebanon was mostly seen as an extension of the Palestinian question. See for example İrfan Acar, *Lübnan Bunalımı ve Filistin sorunu [The Lebanon crisis and the Palestine Question]*, Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu 1989; M. Lutfullah Karaman, *Uluslararası ilişkiler çıkmazında Filistin sorunu [The Palestine Question in the deadlock of international relations]*, Istanbul: İz Yayıncılık 1991.

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In Turkey, according to the constitution, citizenship is territorial and devoid of any cultural and racial connotation, but the popular notion of a 'Turk' is in practice conceived with an ethnic and religious reference, seeing the Sunni Turk as the decisive and core element of Turkey.

Lebanese national identity is torn between the individual's attachment to his or her confessional groups and his attachment to the Lebanese entity, or to a broader notion of 'Arabness', and therefore one would expect Lebanese political debate to refer frequently to the experience of the *millet* system. Turkey, on the other hand, has completely done away with the Ottoman practice of organizing its population in confessional groups, making the *millet* experience seemingly irrelevant. In reality, however, Turkish historians, intellectuals, and particularly proponents of political Islam often point to the merits of the *millet* system and its potential for organizing modern societies, going so far as to see in it a prototype of liberal concepts of society. The Turkish historian Kemal Karpat, teaching in the United States, says for example:

> 'The Ottoman state was probably the most perfect Islamic state ever to come into existence. It sought to create a *homo islamicus* in accordance with the Shariat, while permitting the non-Muslims to retain their faith and identity through the liberal provisions of the millet system.'[25]

Other Turkish historians assert that 'the tolerance being one of the cornerstones of the tradition of the Turkish-Islamic state' al-

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[25]  Kemal Karpat: 'Presidential Address – MESA 1985: Remarks on MESA and Nation and Nationality in the Middle East', *Middle East Studies Association Bulletin* 20 (1986), 9.

lowed its subcultures to persist,[26] made possible by the almost perfect construction of the millet system.[27] Western societies saw the transformation from feudalism through absolutism to the democratic system. The Ottoman society, however, never experienced any changes and saw no reason for it. 'The state had a social structure which might be called a federation of nations.'[28]

The transformation of the Ottoman millet system into a pattern of opposing nations is interpreted in a similar manner. At the beginning there is a kind of Ottoman-Islamic *contrat social*, the "classical' relationship between the Sultan and the *dhimmī*. The European politics of penetration and usurpation however destroys the harmonious and stable power structure and leads to the torn and conflict-laden character of today's Middle East. In comparison to present-day inter-communal conflicts the Ottoman achievements in providing tolerance and harmony can be reassessed.[29]

Two self-images are here made to converge: the image of the Ottoman imperium that acted in the tradition of 'tolerance' and 'liberality', built the harmonious millet-system and e.g. allowed the immigration of Jews fleeing from anti-semitic Europe, and the

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[26]  Mim Kemal Öke, *Ermeni Meselesi 1914-1923 [The Armenian Question 1914-1923]*, Istanbul: Aydınlar Ocağı 1986, 281.

[27]  Gülnihal Bozkurt, *Alman-İngiliz Belgelerinin ve Siyasi Gelişmelerin Işığı altında Gayrımüslim Osmanlı Vatandaşlarının Hukuki Durumu [The legal status of the non-Muslim Ottoman citizens according to German and English documents and in the light of political developments]*, Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu 1989, 10.

[28]  Bilal Eryılmaz, *Osmanlı Devletinde Gayrımüslim Teb'anın Yönetimi [The administration of non-Muslim subjects in the Ottoman empire]*, Istanbul 1990, 12.

[29]  Öke, *Ermeni Meselesi*, 283.

Turkish nation state that emerged in the fight against imperialists and other adversaries. Most historians would accept that this transformation certainly took place: from an imperial and multi-ethnic power to the defensive and fragile structure out of which Turkey would emerge as the core element. Yet, a simultaneous role as multi-national imperium and anti-imperial nation corresponds less to reality than to the Turkish historians′ efforts to find a satisfying transformation from the first to the second image. Turkish historians want to defend their past and the legitimacy of their territorial possessions.

In Lebanese political consciousness the Ottoman past of Lebanon is generally even not rejected, it is simply ignored. But this is not an exception: the Lebanese political consciousness seems to have developed the capability of a concerted forgetfulness. In the Lebanon after the long civil war 'a pervasive mood of lethargy, indifference, weariness which borders, at times, on collective amnesia'[30] was often described. In the same vein after 1990, as after the short civil war of 1958, the formula of 'there is no victor and no defeated' *(lā-ghālib wa-lā-maghlūb)* was often stressed in the attempt to wipe out the memory of hatred and suffering. This negligence and forgetfulness of the past might also be an heritage of Ottoman rule, particularly between 1840 and 1860. A peace treaty between Druzes and Maronites after the civil war in 1860 based expressedly on the 'oblivion of the past'. The Ottoman phrase *mażā mā mażā* ('let the bygones be bygones') was enforced by the Ottoman authorities in the peace protocol after the clashes of 1845

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[30] Samir Khalaf, 'Urban Design and the Recovery of Beirut', in: *Recovering Beirut*, eds. Samir Khalaf and Philip S. Khoury, Leiden: Brill, 42.

in the Mountain.[31] The suppressing of the Ottoman past in the Lebanese public might be in this sense another consociationalist venture in order to equalize the balance sheets of loss and suffering – the precondition for cross-communitarian co-existence.

Engin Akarlı rightly says in his important work *The Long Peace: Ottoman Lebanon 1861-1920* that the confessionalist system was a success in its time. But the long-term Ottoman contribution to the Lebanese identity seems ambiguous: on the one hand the Ottomans contributed to the institutionalizing of conscociationalism (a heritage also ambiguous in itself) but for the price of repressing the past. In this sense the Lebanese will have to face their suppressed Ottoman past to be able to do away with it finally.

## 5. Placebo multiculturalism and toxic *mille*tism

In Lebanon, both proposed solutions, a comprehensive laicism or a purged and salubrious confessionalism, might be consistent with multiculturalism, but the second concept seems at the first glance closer to multicultural demands. While the dignity of the individual would not be violated, the religious group and its significance for the cultural identity of Lebanon are acknowledged. In the United States, however, often thought to have come close to a multicultural society, the state protects the individual and not separate ethnic or religious groups. By virtue of this protection of the individual, the declaration of belief in a religion or belonging to an ethnic group is also protected, although this in itself is not the object of protection.

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[31] By the way, this *mażā-mā-mażā* phrase was heavily rejected by the Maronites as they saw their hopes for indemnities to be paid by the Druze or the Ottomans being damaged.

We would, however, bet that to start a debate on multiculturalism, let alone on the *millet* system, in Lebanon without drawing on the country's real historical heritage, would open Pandora's box rather than free Aladin's genie. Lebanon has painfully experienced how seemingly neutral concepts become imbued with significance in the sectarian struggle for power, and unfortunately '*millet* system' and 'multiculturalism' are ideal terms with which the old games could be continued. A look back into its history might be helpful for Lebanon. Yet, it seems that although the historical experience of the *millet* system and the discussion of multiculturalism might generally enrich political debate, in Lebanon's case at least, it might be easier to solve the fundamental political problems without them.