Lebanese Political Dynamics: Do Anti-American Attitudes Coincide with Anti-Democratic Attitudes?

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This study examines the correlation between 1000 Lebanese respondents' religious orientations and their feelings towards the United States and democracy. The data are provided from the Pew Global Attitudes Project administered by the Princeton Survey Research Associates International in April of 2005. Consistent with literature on Lebanon's political history, the analysis reveals a negative correlation between Muslims and positive opinions toward the United States. However, because of the inequality of Lebanon's government structure that favors Christians, there is a positive correlation between Muslims and a preference for a true democratic form of government in Lebanon. The study findings contribute to a more complete cultural understanding of Lebanese political dynamics.

U.S. foreign policy influences events in every corner of the globe. This is especially true in the Middle East, a region of recurring instability and enormous political and economic interest. Following the tragic events of September 11, 2001, the President of the United States, George W. Bush, declared a "Global War on Terror," further highlighting the importance of the Middle East, and reaffirming his policy of fostering democracy there. In a speech to new Air Force officers, President Bush said the War on Terror resembles "the great clashes of the last century" between democracy and totalitarianism. Bush warned, "If that region is abandoned to

terrorists and dictators, it will be a constant source of violence and alarm."

For the past several decades, the central focus of U.S. Middle East policy has been America's relationship with Israel. The strong support the U.S. holds for Israel, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the related effort to spread democracy throughout the region have been a source of tension and aggravation of Arab and Islamic opinion toward these Western powers. Israel has been the largest annual recipient of direct U.S. economic and military assistance since 1976, and uses much of the aid to subsidize its own defense industry. Major attacks executed by Israel on its Muslim enemies are often carried out in military jets and helicopters provided by the United States, communicating symbolic conclusions of the United States' connection with Israel.

Israel's northern neighbor, Lebanon, has a history of conflict and complicated relations with its surrounding nations. Despite deep differences that continue to divide Lebanon on a sectarian basis, there are some important areas of agreement. Recent studies reveal that popular support for Hezbollah has increased significantly as it fights for economic reforms within Lebanon and remains the only legitimate force to stand up against Israel. With the Lebanese military too weak to tackle Hezbollah or Israel. Haddad found that shortly after the 2006 summer war with Israel, the origins of support for Hezbollah were correlated with the level of satisfaction with government performance and the degree of personal religiosity displayed by the respondents.³ This new support for Hezbollah could severely infringe upon U.S. National Security Strategy (NSS) objectives to defeat global terrorism while creating an infrastructure for democracy. Escalating support for Hezbollah is thought to foster terrorism,

¹ "Bush: War on terror 'like WWII." BBC News, June 20, 2007, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/3771401.

² John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, "Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy," *Middle East Policy* 13, no. 3 (2006): 31.

³ Simon Haddad, "The Origins of Popular Support for Lebanon's Hezbollah," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 29, no. 1 (2006): 21.

unrest on Israel's border, and other forms of regional instability. To achieve NSS objectives, it is critical that the United States policy makers identify the factors contributing to the lack of support for the central Lebanese government and furthermore the source of hostility towards the U.S.

As terrorism has continued to destroy Lebanon's economy, spiraling the country into further debt and preventing foreign investment, the United States and other nations worry the Lebanese economy could collapse. This could create a nurturing environment for terrorist operations, or make room for further Syrian and Iranian influence directly or via Hezbollah. It is critical that factors dividing public opinion are understood and addressed as they affect who will hold power in Lebanon. Party lines drawn on sectarian divides and debates regarding power distribution in the current Lebanese government contribute to tension and increase the potential for instability. The United States continues to have high interest in Middle Eastern affairs, and attempts to mold unstable governments such as Lebanon's in favor of U.S. interests. Lebanese public opinion of the United States may determine if citizens will accept a U.S.-backed government that also heavily supports a well-known enemy to Lebanon- Israel. This study seeks to empirically measure Lebanese perceptions of the United States and its policy in Lebanon and the Middle East, revealing the extent the United States can continue to operate within Lebanon. Furthermore, this study will investigate if the Lebanese are likely to support a move towards a proportionately representative democratic government in Lebanon.

A Diverse Lehanon

Lebanon is the most religiously diverse state in the Middle East with various sects of Christian and Muslims, including Shi'a, Sunni and Druze Muslims. Sectarian loyalties form the

⁴ "Executive Summary, Lebanon." *Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment- Eastern Mediterranean.* http://www.janes.com (accessed February 18, 2007).

foundation of Lebanese politics and many of the groups have opposing perceptions of Lebanon's identity. Lebanon is a parliamentary republic based on prescribed division of power on a confessional basis. With political power divided unequally along sectarian lines, Lebanese politics have always been tumultuous. The original constitution, written at a time when Christians were the demographic majority, favored the Christians, guaranteeing them more parliamentary seats than the Muslims. 54 of 99 legislators were Christians, but since the 1989 Ta'if agreement, which among other things expanded parliament, they are 64 of 128. The constitution does not take into account Lebanon's shifting demographic balance. Although there has not been a census since the 1940s, the CIA World Factbook estimates that the Christians now only account for a little more than 30 percent of the population. Meanwhile, the number of Shi'a Muslims, the most marginalized group in Lebanon, is now believed to exceed the number of Sunni Muslims. Additionally, the presence of around 405,425 Palestinian refugees remains a threat to Lebanon's stability.7

Theoretical Framework

The dearth of published literature addressing Lebanon's internal struggles invites investigation as to how public opinion translates into Lebanese internal and external affairs. Although the United States has continually attempted to play a significant role in Lebanese affairs, in the light of America's connection with Israel,

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⁵ The Ta'if Agreement was negotiated in Ta'if, Saudi Arabia by the surviving members of Lebanon's 1972 parliament. The agreement covered political reform, the ending of the Lebanese Civil War, the establishment of special relations between Lebanon and Syria, and a framework for the beginning of complete Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon. It was signed on October 22, 1989.

⁶ "Executive Summary, Lebanon."

⁷ Central Intelligence Agency, "2007 World Factbook: Lebanon," *Central Intelligence Agency*, https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/le.html (accessed June 14, 2007).

involvement in Iraq, and Bush's War on Terror, U.S. relations with Lebanon have been particularly unstable. Because a significant number of Lebanon's conflicts have been somehow related to clashes with Israel, many Lebanese hold Israel responsible for much of the devastation experienced in their country. As the United States continues to faithfully back Israel financially and diplomatically, while sharing only a fraction of what they provide Israel with Lebanon, many Lebanese hold strong distrust towards the United States and maintain deep suspicion regarding U.S. interests in Lebanese politics.

Hezbollah has existed in Lebanon as the only military force able to stand up to Israel and other Western powers, and as a result, has recently gained considerable support from a variety of Lebanese citizens. Hezbollah is a political, social, welfare, military, commercial and educational network that operates as a legitimate political party in Lebanon, participates in elections and holds seats in the National Parliament. Hezbollah is also a group holding fundamentalist values that is one of the U.S. State Department's designated foreign terrorist organizations. As Roy makes clear, Islamic fundamentalism rejects modernity and Western models of politics and economics, suggesting that Hezbollah sympathizers would reject any U.S. intervention and refuse a Western-style democracy in their country.8 Although support for fundamentalist groups such as Hezbollah has increased, it is questionable whether recent Muslim supporters truly identify with fundamentalist values and oppose democracy. Furthermore, Hezbollah has maintained relative unpopularity throughout much of its existence among the Christian majority in Lebanon, and it is likely that recent support for Hezbollah among the Lebanese is not an expression of support for Hezbollah's fundamentalist values, but rather an expression of a shared hatred for Israel.

Deep religious rifts remain within Lebanon, and relations with the United States will continue to be a dividing factor among

⁸ Oliver Roy, *The Failure of Political Islam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 82, 215.

Lebanese citizens. As the literature addresses, the U.S. supports full withdrawal of Syrian influence, and advocates Lebanon's current constitution and government. Lebanon's constitution provides Christians with disproportional amounts of power compared to Muslims, who are now the numerical majority, resulting in a degree of political and economic inequality. Because of this favor that Christians receive, they are likely to have favorable opinions towards the United States as they benefit from their U.S-backed Lebanese government. As a result of this inequality, in addition to the U.S.'s history and current policy interests in the Middle East, it is likely that Muslims will have less favorable opinions of the United States.

While President Bush broadcasts the United State's desire for democracy in the Middle East, the U.S. also has a list of other priorities in the region: cooperation and assistance on counterterrorism, fostering peace with Israel and its neighbors, stemming the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, access to oil, and preventing Islamic fundamentalists from seizing power. Although the U.S. seems to prefer democratic regimes, it is important that the government leaders holding power in Lebanon favor the U.S. As anti-Israeli and anti-American sentiments remain pervasive in Lebanon among the Muslim populations that are politically marginalized, free and open elections could lead to the rise of an Islamic-controlled government hostile to Israel and the United States. Furthermore, some U.S. policy makers suspect that free and open elections could open the door to Hezbollah to gain more power in the central government, as Hamas did in Palestine. Because of the demographic realities, Christians may recognize their tenuous position and seek to preserve power within Lebanon. It is likely that Christians will prefer to keep influential Christian leaders in office who work towards westernizing the Lebanese economy instead of propagating an equal and representative democracy.

The following results are expected:

H1: There is a negative correlation between Muslims and warm feelings towards the United States.

H2: There is a positive correlation between Muslims and a preference for democracy.

H3: Non-Muslims will be more satisfied with the Lebanese government than Muslims.

H4: U.S. policy in the region will have an effect on how Lebanese feel towards the U.S.

Methodology

This study is an analysis of data on Lebanese adults over the age of 18, collected in May 2005 in the *Pew Global Attitudes Survey*. The results of the survey are based on face-to-face interviews under the direction of Princeton Survey Research Associates International. The questionnaire was composed of 53 items and was administered in six predominantly Muslim countries. The margin of error for the survey is three percent.

Measurement, Independent Variables

The purpose of this study is to empirically measure Lebanese perceptions of the United States and its policy in Lebanon and the Middle East, and to investigate if the Lebanese are likely to support a move towards a democratic and fair government in Lebanon. Two main dependent variables were chosen for an OLS multiple regression analysis: "U.S. Thermometer," and the indexed variable titled "Democracy."

U.S. Thermometer. Feelings towards the U.S. continue to fluctuate depending on the social backdrop of Lebanon. This variable was measured by a single unit pertaining to opinions towards the United States in Lebanon. The question was asked to all respondents, "Please tell me if you have a very favorable, somewhat favorable, somewhat unfavorable, or very unfavorable opinion of the United States." As with any categorical measure, there may be discrepancies as to how different respondents distinguish between "somewhat" or "very." Additionally, there was no option provided for neutral feelings, resulting in some

level of prompting of the respondent. Nevertheless, because 100 percent of the respondents answered this question, it may be assumed that this measure is representative of the population.

Democracy. Respondents indicated their position regarding their value of democracy in Lebanon in comparison to a strong leader and strong economy. As the literature discusses, historically pro-west governments, through strong leaders, have stressed the importance of a strong, westernized economy, and have avoided proportional equality of power in Lebanon's confessional government. I created an index out of two separate items to create the variable "democracy." (1) "Should we rely on a democratic form of government to solve our country's problems or a leader with a strong hand?" (2) "If you had to choose between a good democracy or a strong economy, which would you say is more important?" The validity and reliability of this index may be questionable because the questions were presented in a dichotomous format. Moreover, theoretically, this index may not be measuring exactly what it was intended to measure: the preference of democracy. Respondents may have various conditions within which they feel democracy would be more important than the alternative. One also may think that a strong economy is a result of a good democracy, making the question counterintuitive. Furthermore, democracies come in variety of forms depending on the country of focus, and thus, priming different ideas among respondents. Lebanon's political history has been marked by foreign influences that steer supposedly democratic processes. At the time this poll was taken in Lebanon, there had been recent discussion and support for the principal of a "one man, one vote" direct election of the next Lebanese President.9

For all variables, respondents who did not answer questions or who chose "I don't know" were not included.

⁹ James Zogby, "Poll Shows Bases for United in Lebanon," *Zogby International*, April 1, 2005, http://www.zogby.com.

Findings

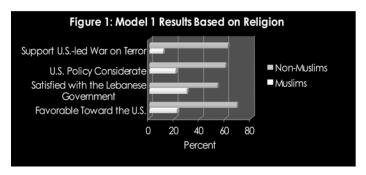
Model 1 presents the results of the regression run between the U.S. Thermometer variable and "Government Satisfaction," "U.S. Considerate of Lebanon," "Support of the U.S. War on Terror," "Democracy," and the control variables: Muslim, Age, Income, Education and Male. The data reveal that 99 percent of Lebanese hold unfavorable views of Jews. This variable was intended to be used in the regression to reflect how Lebanon's relationship with Israel may correlate with feelings towards the United States; however, because of the lack of variance, this variable was not used.

Model 1: Thermometer scores predicting warmth towards the United States in 2005

Variable	Coefficient (std. error)	P> t
Government Satisfaction	.275 (.058)**	.000
U.S. Considerate of Leb.	.408 (.032)**	.000
U.S. War on Terror	1.11 (.073)**	.000
Muslim	116 (.056)**	.002
Age	030 (.028)	.278
Income	.042 (.024)*	.074
Education	007 (.012)	.510
Male	093 (.046)*	.047
Constant	.789 (.130)	.000

N = 762, adjusted $R^2 = .71$ **Significant at 95% p-value < .05 *Significant at 90% p-value < .1

The results of the regression show that satisfaction towards the Lebanese government is positively correlated with warm feelings towards the United States. In other words, those who are satisfied with how things are going in Lebanon are more likely to have warm feelings towards the United States. Muslims are less likely to be satisfied with the Lebanese government, and accordingly, there is an inverse relationship between Muslims and warm feelings towards the U.S. Figure 1 shows that, 69 percent of non-Muslims have favorable opinions of the United States and 54 percent are satisfied with the way things were going in Lebanon,



while 22 percent of Muslims have favorable opinions of the United States and 30 percent are satisfied with the way things were going in Lebanon. These results are consistent with the first and third hypotheses: Non-Muslims will have warmer feelings towards the U.S. than Muslims and Non-Muslims will be more satisfied with the Lebanese government than Muslims.

Regarding U.S. international policy, the regression shows that those who feel that the U.S. takes Lebanese interest into account are more likely to have warm opinions towards the U.S., as are those who support the U.S.-led efforts to fight terrorism. The large size of the coefficients highlights the strengths of these relationships. As displayed in Figure 1, 60 percent of non-Muslims believe that the United States is considerate of Lebanese interests, while 79 percent of Muslims believe that the U.S. does not take into account Lebanese interests when making their international policy decisions. These perspectives are in line with non-Muslim and Muslim overall feelings of the U.S. As the literature suggests, history of unfavorable policies towards Muslims and Muslim interests have created negative perceptions of the United States by Muslims. Many Muslims consider the U.S. to favor Israel and Western sympathizers over Lebanon, and more specifically, Muslim interests. The U.S. War on Terror has had a direct effect on numerous Islamic groups in the region. Because Hezbollah is specifically labeled a terrorist organization, the U.S. War on Terror is aimed at hindering Hezbollah's growth and influence. Because Hezbollah functions as a legitimate political party and social organization within Lebanon, U.S.

efforts to stop Hezbollah are seen by many Muslims as an infringement on their interests.

Also statistically significant, though with a 90 percent confidence interval, those with higher incomes have warmer feelings towards the United States. As the literature mentions, there is vast economic disparity within Lebanon. Few elites have drastically higher incomes than the rest of the nation. Christians are likely to make up a significant portion of the wealthier population in Lebanon in addition to a number of wealthy Sunni Muslims. Shi'a Muslims are typically among the lower classes, although there is some level of wealth in Shi'a populations. It is not surprising that wealthy elites who have considerable influence within the government and benefit from U.S. support have warmer feelings towards the United States. Poorer individuals may view the United States as a perpetrator of inequality, particularly among Shi'a Muslims. They are likely to favor groups such as Hezbollah, who fight for economic reforms and equality for the marginalized Shi'a Muslims.

Although not statistically significant, there is an inverse relationship between those with more education and warmer feelings towards the United States, as there is an inverse relationship between those with more education and their satisfaction with the Lebanese government. The basis for the direction of education's coefficient is difficult to pinpoint; however, it is possible that the negative feelings by those with more education towards both the U.S. and Lebanese government is a result of a lack of economic opportunity for the well educated. As seen in Table 1, the number of Lebanese with secondary and university degrees is disproportional to the income differences.

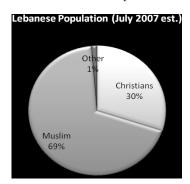
The second regression analysis, Model 2, uncovers interesting dynamics of Lebanon's political scene.

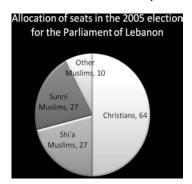
Table 2: Model 2: Preference for Democracy in Lebanon			
Variable	Coefficient (std. error)	P> t	

Variable	Coefficient (std. error)	P> t
U.S. Thermometer	070 (.036)*	.055
Democracy can work in Lebanon	-1.20 (.091)**	.000
Muslim	.114 (.153)	.455
Age	016 (.030)	.593
Income	191 (.040)**	.000
Muslim*U.S. Thermometer	076 (.051)	.137
Muslim*Income	.107 (.050)**	.029
Constant	2.24 (.174)	.000

N = 773, adjusted $R^2 = .27$ **Significant at 95% p-value <.05

The data reveal that there is a negative correlation between warm feelings for the U.S. and a preference for democracy. Initially this seems counterintuitive, considering the United States' campaign for fostering democracies in the Middle East and general Christian support for the U.S. However, revisiting the social dynamics of Lebanon's political structure, the political power is divided along sectarian lines. In line with information presented from the previous regression, Christians, who hold great power under the current political structure, are more likely than





Muslims to have warm feelings towards the United States, who supports the present form of government and pro-West leadership in Lebanon. Given a true democracy (one where all legislative seats and executive positions would be open to any

^{*}Significant at 90% p-value<.1

citizen regardless of ethnicity and faith, including the Lebanese Palestinians) the Muslim majority, specifically Shi'a Muslims, would hold the bulk of the power. Additionally, pro-Western leaders benefit significantly from a Western-style economy that promotes capitalism and foreign investment. Hence, one can understand why the U.S. supportive Christians would prefer the present form of government over a true representative democracy. In this line of reasoning, although statistically insignificant, it is clear why Muslims are more likely to prefer democracy. The index for Muslims and U.S. Thermometer reveals that as Muslims decrease in their warmth towards the U.S., their preference for democracy will increase at higher rates than for non-Muslims.

Income has a negative correlation with preference of democracy, meaning that those with a lower income prefer a democratic form of government. This further supports the assertion that poorer, marginalized Muslims feel equal representation would improve their position within Lebanon. I created an interaction with Muslims and Income, and found that for Muslims, as income increases, their preference for democracy increases in smaller increments than non-Muslims. Again, this may be in part a result of having Sunni Muslims combined with Shi'a Muslims in the Muslim variable.

Conclusion

A major objective of this project has been to use cross-sectional survey research to evaluate the impact of religion and the Lebanese political system on attitudes toward the U.S. and democracy within Lebanon. The results are consistent throughout: Religion is a significant predictor of attitudes toward the U.S. Specifically, being a Muslim is consistently associated with unfavorable attitudes towards the U.S. and its policy in the region. Non-Muslims are more likely to be satisfied with the current Lebanese government, partly because it greatly favors the Christian population. Greater support for democracy is positively

correlated with being Muslim. This is due in part to the disproportionately divided parliamentary government currently in Lebanon. With a true democracy, Muslims would take power within the Lebanese parliament, and as a result, would possibly end favorable relations to the United States. If trends of pro-Hezbollah support continue, it is possible that members of the Hezbollah could gain more seats within the Lebanese parliament, providing them with official influence within the state. Finally, U.S. policy in the region is correlated with how Lebanese feel towards the U.S., based on religious divides.

This study was limited because the survey did not distinguish between Sunni and Shi'a Muslims, which would have given more precise insight to sectarian divides within Lebanon. Furthermore, questions regarding Hezbollah specifically would have provided clarity regarding possible shifts in Lebanon's political dynamic. It is inaccurate to assume all Shi'a support Hezbollah, and moreover it is important to emphasize that support for Hezbollah and the United States among all Lebanese may shift considerably depending on current events in the region.

The findings from this research reveal continuing religious and sectarian tension among the Lebanese people and point toward potential trouble for Lebanon in the future if the constitutional and foreign interference issues are not resolved. From the assassination of former anti-Syrian Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in 2005 and the assassination of the anti-Syrian Parliamentarian Walid Eido in 2007, there is reason to suspect that Syria is attempting to regain influence in Lebanon, creating increasing political unrest. The 2007 uprising by Fatah al-Islam, a Sunni Palestinian group with past links to al-Qaeda, is suspected by the Lebanese government to be coordinating with Lebanese intelligence. The 2006 street protests with nearly a million pro-Hezbollah supporters demanding "a free government," manifest an increasingly discontent mobilized mass of individuals within

 10 Nicholas Blanford, "Lebanon Battles Fatah al Islam," $\it Time$ Online, June 1, 2007,

http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1627353,00.html.

Lebanon. If Haddad is correct in explaining the rise of Islamic fundamentalism, there may be continued support for organizations that challenge the central Lebanese government such as Hezbollah. Haddad cites the factors of inequality of wealth, failure to handle the conflict with Israel well, rise of economic slowdowns, stagnation and insecurity, mass unemployment, a sense of external domination and spurious democratic systems as leading to fundamentalist action and support, many of which are seen within this story of Lebanese politics. ¹¹

Relations with Israel continue to define perceptions of the Saudi Arabia Ambassador, Prince U.S. in the Middle East. Bandar, is quoted in Bob Woodard's State of Denial as claiming that correlation of Israel with the United States "will have a total devastating and extremely dangerous impact on U.S. interests in the region. And unfortunately, the impression the Arab world has now of the United States, the only superpower in this world, isn't of a just and fair country but as one totally on the side of the Israelis." He suggests "the United States has to find a way to separate the actions of the Israeli government and its own interests in the region." As revealed in the Pews Global Attitudes Survey, nearly all Lebanese citizens have negative feelings toward Israel, a fact with which the United States will have to work. As previously suggested, recent support for Hezbollah among the Lebanese is likely an expression of a shared hatred for Israel.

The United States has made Lebanon a key front in its attempts to enervate Hezbollah's influence in the Middle East through weakening Syria and its ally, the regional powerhouse Iran. President Bush suspects that the two countries are attempting to destabilize Lebanon by sponsoring these uprisings. If the United States removes its hand from the region, many speculate that Lebanon will be prone to further invasion of Syria and Iran directly or via Hezbollah. However, it also seems that

¹¹ Haddad 2006, 135-54.

¹² Bob Woodward, *State of Denial: Bush at War, Part III* (New York: Simon and Schuster, Inc., 2006), 46.

U.S. presence is the very catalyst producing recent fundamentalist support and activity. Fuller concludes that "it will be a disaster for the United States, and another cruel chapter in the history of the Muslim World, if the war on terrorism fails to liberalize these battered societies and instead [continues] to exacerbate those very conditions that contribute to the virulent anti-Americanism of today."¹³

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¹³ Graham E. Fuller, "The Future of Political Islam," Foreign Affairs, 81 no. 7 (2002): 50.

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