Lebanese Sunni Muslim Politicians' Narratives on the Political and Religious Leadership of the Lebanese Sunnis: Reconstructing Inclusive Political Leadership in Lebanon

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Abstract

In this article, Sunni Muslims politicians' narratives on the political and religious leadership of the Lebanese Sunnis are examined in an effort to reconstruct inclusive political leadership in Lebanon. The Lebanese Sunnis are primary actors in the Lebanese politics. The significant role played by Sunnis is recognised in the National Pact 1943, which paved the way for Lebanon's independence from France together with the Taif Agreement, which ended Lebanon's civil war. The signing of the agreements culminated into the establishment of the confessional political system in Lebanon and enabled the Sunnis to constitute an integral part of that system. However, Lebanon is still saddled with internal political problems worsened by the struggle for influence over Lebanon from external actors. The overlapping between domestic and foreign factors is critical in constructing Sunni narratives on their leadership. Sunni framing constructions suggest that the Sunni leadership is galvanising the Sunni community to serve its own interests. The disempowerment of Sunnis is mainly attributed to the failure of their political and religious leadership. This article, therefore, argues for the reconstruction of inclusive leadership in Lebanon. This will enable the Lebanese actors to delegitimise identity politics and promote national cohesion and stability. It also recommends the establishment of independent electoral commissions, prohibition of foreign funding of political groupings, and dismantling of the confessional political system in Lebanon.

Keywords: Lebanese Sunni Muslim; Religious Leadership: Lebanon

1. Introduction

The Lebanese Sunnis are principal actors in the Lebanese political game. The pivotal role played by the Sunni actors is captured in the National Pact 1943. This pact or agreement paved the way for Lebanon's independence from France, and the Taif Agreement 1989, which ended Lebanon's long civil

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war (Lust, 2011; Salem, 2011; Meier and Di Peri, 2017; Nagle & Clancy, 2019; Salloukh, 2019; Badran, 2021). The signing of the agreements culminated into the establishment of the confessional political system in Lebanon. Demographically, the Lebanese Sunnis are the largest group in Lebanon (Salamey, 2014; Author, 2019, Knudsen, 2020). This enables them to constitute an integral part of Lebanon's confessional political system which specifies that the Lebanese president should be a Christian Maronite, the prime minister a Muslim Sunni and the speaker of parliament a Muslim Shia (Lust, 2011; Najem, 2012; Salloukh et al., 2015). Therefore, the confessional system in Lebanon, despite its flaws, has provided opportunities for the Sunnis to hold the position of the prime minister and other key positions in the Lebanese government (Ash & Dolan, 2021; Badran, 2021; Meier and Di Peri, 2017).

Prominent Sunni prime ministers include Riad Solh (1849-1951), Saeb Salam (1905-2000), Rashid Karami (1920-1987) and Rafik Hariri (1944-2005) (Atiya, 1973; Gilmour, 1987; Henley, 2016; Author, 2019; Moghaddas & Yazdani, 2021; Wahab, 2022). The Sunnis have actively participated in the Lebanese politics and provided leadership at the national level but their strength and unity as a community (or group) were affected because of the civil war (1975-1990) and external involvement in their political affairs (Rabil, 2011; El-Husseini, 2012). In addition, the assassination of influential political and religious figures such as the Prime Minister Rashid Karami in 1987, the Mufti Hassan Khalid in 1989 and the Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in 2005 weakened the Sunni political and religious leadership in Lebanon (Rougier, 2007; Rabil, 2014).

Despite these challenges, the Sunni community saw the emergence of these notable Sunni leaders and prime ministers as a powerful inspiration. It is arguable however, that the emergence of Rafik Hariri (1944-2005) raised the status of Sunnis within Lebanon's political system (Knudsen, 2016; Author, 2019). Promising to rebuild post-war Lebanon, Hariri manifested himself as a national leader for all the Lebanese communities regardless of their religious affiliations (Meier and Di Peri, 2017). Hariri's enormous wealth and strong relationship with Saudi Arabia and the West enabled him to consolidate the role of Sunnis in Lebanon and to cultivate strong relations with non-Sunni counterparts (Cammett and Issar, 2010).

Therefore, it was unsurprising that Sunnis, regardless of their political alignments, rallied behind the Sunni-based Future Movement, which was established by the Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in 1992 (Majed, 2020) and is currently led by his son the Prime Minister Saad, to foster solidarity and bring about unity in the face of tough domestic and regional challenges (Gade, 2019). It is in these circumstances that the Future Movement was able to mobilise Sunnis and reconsolidate its presence as the predominant player in the Sunni politics, but the tragic assassination of Rafik Hariri in 2005 significantly weakened Sunni political leadership and positions in Lebanon (Rougier, 2007; Knudsen, 2016). This was not the first time that the Lebanese Sunnis face serious challenges regarding their influence over Lebanon, but Hariri's assassination marked a turning point in (re)shaping their perceptions on the state (Meier and Di Peri, 2017). Ever since, the Sunni establishment, both clerical and political, seemed dysfunctional and incapable of reasserting its voice in the Lebanese politics (Author, 2019; Hanafi, 2019).

The main issue regarding Prime Minister Hariri's assassination is that it triggered the emergence of different kinds of injustice framing constructions among the Sunni community (Author, 2019). Sunnis felt that the assassination was meant to jeopardise their existence and undermine their influence over Lebanon political affairs (Abdel-Latif, 2008; International Crisis Group, 2010). As Abdel-Latif (2008) argues, Sunnis started to act "*as a minority whose existence was threatened, whose leaders were targeted, and whose sense of victimization was deep*" (Abdel-Latif 2008:2). These framing constructions show how Sunnis felt more insecure following Hariri's assassination.

Sunni support for the "political" leadership of Sunnis as exemplified by the Future Movement, which is currently led by the Prime Minister Saad Hariri, gradually declined over the years because of the

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perceived failure of the Future Movement, most especially after the death of Hariri, to protect Sunnis from domestic and regional challenges. On several occasions, the Future Movement was accused of using its political capital to boost its own credentials at the expense of Sunni interests, hence failing to tackle Sunni grievances and bring Sunnis together (Rabil, 2014; Lefèvre, 2018; Author, 2019). Also, the apparent weakness of Dar al-Fatwa, the official Sunni "religious" leadership, and its inability to influence the Sunni discourse has been attributable to its financial scandals, inherent politicisation, and linkage with domestic and foreign actors (El-Husseini, 2004; Lefèvre, 2014a; Lefèvre, 2015; Author, 2019).

Regionally, the struggle for influence over Lebanon between Saudi Arabia and the Syrian Iranian alliance has been essential for (re/de) constructing Sunni narratives on Sunni political affairs (Osoegawa, 2013; Author, 2019). Regional actors have been able to break through the Sunni leadership either through carrot-and-stick policies or through adopting catchy slogans such as supporting Palestine, opposing Israel, or calling for Arab unity (Author, 2019). Collectively, the combination of all these domestic and regional factors, have increasingly brought frustration for Sunnis on their political and religious leadership and exploited Sunni weaknesses within Lebanon's political system.

This article examines how the Lebanese Sunni Muslim politicians construct their narratives on the political and religious leadership of the Lebanese Sunni community and how those narratives are understood, articulated and debated. Arguably, the politics of representation together with the multiplicity of—and at times— fluid politicised Sunni identities play a key role in shaping the framing construction of Sunnis. In short, the need for an inclusive political leadership in Lebanon is critical to allow Sunnis to deconstruct radical narratives and restore their faith in the Lebanese state.

2. Research Questions

The following are the research questions that needed to be answered:

1. How do the Lebanese Sunni Muslim politicians construct their narratives on the political and religious leadership of the Sunni Muslim community in Lebanon?

2. How can inclusive political leadership be reconstructed in Lebanon?

3. Method

This article employs a qualitative single case study research design (Bryman, 2012; Creswell, 2014; Yin, 2018). It draws on Max Weber's "interpretivist" (*Verstehen*) research approach of understanding the subjective meaning of social actions (Baert 2005; Bryman 2012:30). According to interpretivism, reality cannot be understood without engaging social actors who (re/de) construct social reality and attach subjective meaning to it (see Goldkuhl, 2012; Ryan, 2018). It cannot be captured objectively because there are different perceptions and understandings among social actors (Ormston et al., 2014:12). The Meanings as constructed by those actors are often contested hence informing the ways in which those actors narrate their understanding of a social phenomenon.

This article derives its validity from the ontological and epistemological underpinnings of *Verstehen* or interpretivist understanding (Hollis and Smith, 1990; Baert, 2005; Bryman, 2012). Ontologically, reality is socially constructed. Therefore, this article does not aim to offer a causal or objective explanation but a way to understand socially constructed narratives on the Lebanese Sunni political and religious leadership from the standing point of acting Sunni individuals. Epistemologically, this article seeks to understand the subjective narratives and perceptions of the Lebanese Sunni actors on the political and religious leadership of the Lebanese Sunnis (see Denzin and Lincoln, 2008; Chowdhury,

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2014; Author, 2019). In line with this Webarian approach, what counts is not what reality is regarding the Sunni leadership but how key Lebanese political actors understand it and narrate it.

To understand the issues regarding Sunni perceptions on their leadership, semi-structured interviews and analysis of documents were carried out. A purposive sampling technique (Bryamn, 2012) was operationalised to select twenty-three (23) research participants including Lebanese group leaders, political and religious leaders, members of the Lebanese parliament (MPs), ministers, and Islamic scholars. The choice of research participants was informed by the need to have various perspectives within the Lebanese Sunni politicians on the Sunni leadership. For this article, interviews and documents were considered as key sources of framing constructions (see Author, 2019), as they help to unmask how Sunni politicians construct their frames on the Sunni political and religious leadership and how those frames are manifested, articulated, and politicised.

This article was part of my PhD research and, as such, ethical permission was sought from Keele University in the United Kingdom before the research was conducted.

4. Contextualising the Findings

This article attempts to deconstruct the notion of political and religious leadership based on confessional affiliations. The credibility, integrity and honesty of the candidate should count as a hallmark of the office holder. In the following, the findings are contextualised into two main headings: Lebanese Sunni Muslim politicians' narratives on the political leadership of the Lebanese Sunnis, and indicators for reconstructing inclusive political leadership in Lebanon. Find below the details.

4.1 Lebanese Sunni Muslims' Narratives on the Political and Religious Leadership of the Lebanese Sunnis

Lebanon as a state was established in 1920 (Salibi, 2003). Within its borders various communities exist, all with different identities, affiliations, and cultures. Lebanon as a state is composed of several confessions (approximately eighteen religious' communities) (Henley, 2016; Author, 2019; Majed, 2020). The political system in Lebanon is constructed as the confessional system meaning political power is distributed among the Lebanese communities according to their percentage of the population (Harb, 2006; Calfat, 2018; Ash & Dolan, 2021). The president of Lebanon is a Christian Maronite, the prime minister is a Muslim Sunni, and the speaker of the Parliament is a Muslim Shia (Naor, 2013).

The purpose of this kind of confessionalism according to the proponents is to bring about peace and to ensure representation to all the Lebanese confessions. However, it is significant to mention that the needed peace yearned for has not always been achieved because of external interferences, politicised identities, and imbalance of power among the Lebanese confessions (see Author, 2019; Hoffman, 2019). In a multi-confessional state like Lebanon, the society is defined by deep religious and cultural divides. This confessional orientation further divided the Lebanese people based on representative groups or transnational identities rather than being rooted in a single national or Lebanese identity (Hana, 2008; Lust, 2011; El-Husseini, 2012; Author, 2019; Badran, 2020).

4.1.1 Navigating Sunni Leadership and Groupings

Contextually, Sunnis in Lebanon amidst confessionalism have two official leaderships: the political leadership, as represented by the Prime Minister Office, the highest political Sunni rank in Lebanon, and the religious leadership as represented by Dar al-Fatwa, the highest religious Sunni rank in Lebanon (Author, 2019). The latter is responsible for overseeing Sunni religious affairs (Author, 2019). It

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is significant to mention that the Sunni political class in Lebanon is composed of different personalities (in each specific period) and groupings which aim to control these positions and ultimately lead the Sunni political and by extension control the religious wing (see Imad, 2006; El-Husseini, 2012; Rabil, 2014; Rougier, 2015).

The groupings are terminologically described as Sunni *Zuama*, which literally means leaders. This group belongs to traditional Sunni lineages such as the Saad family in Sidon, the Salam family in Beirut, the Karami family in Tripoli, among others. These *Zuama* inherited their leadership from their ancestors (Author, 2019). It must be stated that the Sunni arena keeps on witnessing the emergence and decline of Sunni groupings and *Zuama*.

This article primarily focuses on some of the groupings which are politically active in the Sunni politics. The active groups in the Sunni politics are the Future Movement, al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya, the Lebanese Salafists and their different branches (apolitical, political & jihadist), the Islamic Action Front, the League of Muslim Scholars, the Tawheed Movement, al-Ahbash (also known as the Association of Islamic Charitable Projects), Hizb ut-Tahrir, the Union Party and the Arab Liberation Party (Abdel-Latif, 2008; Imad, 2009; Rabil, 2011; Pall, 2013; Rabil, 2014; Author, 2019; Knudsen, 2020; Majed, 2020). These groupings are different from each other in their ideological construction and political affiliation (Author, 2019). Most importantly, they are competing against each other for the leadership of the Sunni community in Lebanon. In this research the framing construction is based on some active groups in the Sunni politics.

The findings suggest that in the present political dispensation, the Sunni political leadership in Lebanon is dominated by the Hariri-led Future Movement. This is the largest Sunni grouping in Lebanon, as is evidenced by the last three parliamentary elections in 2005, 2009 and 2018 (Author, 2019). The Hariri-led Future Movement is gradually becoming the de facto political party for the Sunnis. For instance, in the last parliamentary elections in 2018, sixteen (16) out of twenty-seven (27) Sunni MPs were allied with the Future Movement (Perry, Bassam and Francis, 2018), implying that the Future Movement occupies around 60% of the Sunni Street in Lebanon (Author, 2019). The results also indicate that there are other Sunni actors on the ground and that the Sunni political leadership cannot be limited to a one Sunni grouping or a leader.

The competition between Saad Hariri and Najib Mikati over prime ministerial ambitions exemplifies diversity within the Sunni politics. It is important to mention that within the Sunni political spectrum, there are other groups and personalities that are described as pro-Hezbollah (Karakoç, Özcan and Özcan, 2021) and for that matter pro-Iran and pro-Syria. These groups are the Union Party, al-Ahbash, the Islamic Action Front, the Tawheed Movement and the Arab Liberation Party, and personalities or *Zuama* such as Abdul-Rahim Murad in Beka' region, the Saad family in Sidon and the Karami family in Tripoli (see Abdel-Latif, 2008; Imad, 2009; International Crisis Group, 2010; Rabil, 2014). These groups and *Zuama* oppose the perceived pro-Saudi Arabian and pro-Western policies of the Hariri family (Author, 2019). They are also supported by Syria and Iran's main ally in Lebanon Hezbollah to counter the Hariri family and minimise their influence.

The intra-Sunni rivalry between the former Justice Minister (and head of Internal Security Forces between 2005 and 2013) Ashraf Rifi and Saad Hariri embodies the fragmentation within Sunni political leadership. Rifi used to be a close ally with Hariri but turned fierce rival after the Future Movement's deals with Hezbollah (Lefèvre, 2017). During the municipality elections in Tripoli in 2016, Rifi contested Hariri leadership of the Sunni community when he backed a list of candidates that defeated Hariri's candidates (Lefèvre, 2017).

Recently, the fractionalisation between the "Hariri-brothers" Saad and his older brother Bahaa gathered a momentum in the Sunni politics. Bahaa has been upset with Saad political manoeuvring,

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blaming him of ruining their father's legacy and failing to challenge the dominance of Hezbollah over Lebanon (see Moubayed, 2020). These are few examples to demonstrate intra-Sunni contestations that are inimical to the political development and growth in Lebanon. In the following, other intra-Sunni rivalries are presented to demonstrate the need for reconstructing inclusive political leadership in Lebanon.

4.1.2 Intra-Sunni Rivalries between Saad Hariri and Najib Mikati

The intra-Sunni rivalry between the Prime Ministers Saad Hariri (the son of former Sunni Prime Minister Rafik Hariri and founder of Future Movement) and Najib Mikati illustrates one of the ways Sunnis construct their narratives on the political leadership of Sunnis. The supporters of Saad Hariri and for that matter the Future Movement, feel that Sunnis should rally behind Saad as they come from a popular family and frame Najib Mikati as an "*ally with Syria and Hezbollah*". They claim that he is supported by Iran and Syria to break through the Sunni politics and to challenge the political leadership of Saad Hariri (Author, 2019). These claims in their constructions found legitimacy when in 2011, Najib Mikati headed a new government dominated by Hezbollah and their allies (Wahlisch and Felsch, 2016; Di Peri, 2017).

A senior official from the Future Movement states that in the past "*all politicians… used to rally around Rafik Hariri, but this has never been the case with Najib Mikati. The Hariri family is popular in all the Lebanese cities, whilst Mikati's popularity is only limited to Tripoli…*" (Author, 2019:102).

The framing constructions of the Future Movement were refuted by one respondent aligned to Najib Mikati. He indicates that "*the dispute between Mikati and Hariri was about who has the right to be a prime minister*". In his view, "*the Future Movement believes it is the only group that has the right to choose a prime minister … and this caused the dispute between Mikati and Hariri…*". He interprets the Future Movement respondent's assertion that Mikati is an ally of the Shia community/Hezbollah to be a propaganda aimed at causing disaffection for him. It is essential to mention that despite the framing of Mikati as a "*centrist*", he formed a Hezbollah's-dominated cabinet in 2011 to the detriment of the Future Movement and its supporters who comprise the bulk of Sunnis (Najem, 2012). The failure to include members of the Future Movement denied Mikati's cabinet legitimacy from within a large Sunni constituency (Najem, 2012).

It worth noting, however, that even though Najib Mikati formed a pro-Hezbollah cabinet and at times pursued accommodating policies towards them (Osoegawa, 2013; Salamey, 2014), he tried to remain "*centrist*", balancing the conflicting interests of pro- and anti-Hezbollah groupings (Najem, 2012). In fact, he challenged Hezbollah on different occasions. For example, in 2012, Najib Mikati rejected the proposal to withdraw the funding for the Special Tribunal of Lebanon (STL) regarding Rafik Hariri's assassination despite Hezbollah's opposition (Author, 2019). In addition, his government carried out the "Dissociation Policy" and "Baabda Declaration", that adopted a neutral standing point on the conflict in Syria (Baabda Declaration, 2012; Osoegawa, 2013; Wahlisch and Felsch, 2016:1). The findings of the research also reveal that during Mikati's government, Hezbollah did not declare their military support for the Syrian authority in the conflict in Syria considered a proxy fight between Sunnis and Shias. They declared it following the resignation of his government in March 2013 (see Author, 2019).

4.1.3 Intra-Sunni Rivalry between the League of Muslim Scholars and Dar al-Fatwa

The narrative on Sunni leadership also pertains to its "religious" wing, as demonstrated by Dar al-Fatwa, the official religious Sunni office in Lebanon (Rougier, 2007; Lefèvre, 2015; Author, 2019). Dar al-Fatwa is responsible for managing Sunni religious affairs and sometimes its role extends to include influencing Sunni narratives on political affairs (Skovgaard-Petersen, 1996; Skovgaard-Petersen, 1998; El-Husseini, 2004; Dar al-Fatwa, 2015; Henley, 2016). Even though Dar al-Fatwa is expected to be a

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neutral body, it has been argued that it suffers from institutional drawbacks and is unable, for political reasons, to articulate the manifold interests of the Lebanese Sunnis (Imad, 2009).

A respondent aligned to al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya indicates that, Dar al-Fatwa is the "*umbrella*" that unifies and protects the Sunni spectrum irrespective of their political orientation but reminds that it should remain unbiased in its attitude with Sunni groupings and organisations (Author, 2019). The politicisation of Dar al-Fatwa as it is deemed being controlled by the Future Movement damages the credibility of its framing constructions since not all the Lebanese Sunnis support the Future Movement.

The respondents from Hizb ut-Tahrir, the Political Salafists, the Union Party and the League of Muslim Scholars claim that Dar al-Fatwa is aligned to the Future Movement. Even the Future Movement admits that Dar al-Fatwa is under its sphere of influence (Author, 2019). The nature of the alignment makes the narratives of Dar al-Fatwa not always reliable because of its politicisation and affiliation. The Hariri family on several occasions succeeded in precluding strong contenders for the leadership of Dar al-Fatwa on basis of non-allegiance to the Future Movement. This is often achieved to maintain its dominance of Sunni political and religious affairs (see El-Husseini, 2004; Skovgaard-Petersen, 2004; Lefèvre, 2015; Lefèvre, 2018).

The case of the League of Muslim Scholars epitomises how the politicisation of Dar al-Fatwa led to the emergence of "unofficial" rival Sunni institutions that claim to be representatives of the Sunni cause. According to documents published the League of Muslim Scholars in 2012, the main purpose of its existence has been to "*defend Sunnis in Lebanon, strengthen their presence ... support their just causes,* [and] *integrate with their institutions, especially with the official religious authority* [Dar al-Fatwa] *... by preventing its political exploitation*" (the League of Muslim Scholars, 2012a; the League of Muslim Scholars, 2012b). Notably, this draws attention to the perceived politicisation of Dar al-Fatwa and its mishandling of Sunni problems.

A respondent who is aligned to the League of Muslim Scholars argus that their presence in the Sunni politics is not appreciated by other Sunnis on the ground that they are contesting the political and religious leadership of Sunnis. He further argues that "*the purpose of the League of Muslim Scholars is not to challenge Dar al-Fatwa but to integrate with it*" emphasising that "*Dar al-Fatwa is the official religious Sunni institution*" (Author, 2019: 132-133). The argument of the League of Muslim Scholars is that if Dar al-Fatwa had effectively and impartially managed Sunni affairs, the League of Muslim Scholars would not have emerged. Collectively, all these narratives seek to provide a lead to the claim of intra-Sunni rivalries which do not promote the shared interests of the Sunnis and the Lebanese nation as a whole.

4.1.4 The Declining Popularity of the Future Movement

The literature draws attention to critical factors that have contributed to the erosion of the Future Movement political power and popularity, such as the weakness of its leadership, the declining of its financial resources and the curtailment of financial-cum-political support from its main patrons, Saudi Arabia (see Daher 2015; Meier and Di Peri, 2017; Author, 2019, Tınas and Özlem Tür, 2021). Yet, this article highlights other factors contributing to the declining popularity of the Future Movement as constructed by the research respondents.

1.Lack of Collaboration with Other Sunnis

A comparison between the outcomes of the last two parliamentary elections in 2009 and 2018 reveals that the Future Movement lost eleven (11) seats in 2018 (El-Amine, 2018; Perry, Bassam, and Francis, 2018). However, it remains the leading grouping in the Sunni politics but no longer the sole

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representative of the Lebanese Sunnis as other Sunni candidates such as the Prime Minister Najib Mikati and other Sunni "independent candidates" and affiliates with Hezbollah such as Abdul Rahim Mourad (the Union Party) and Walid Sukkarieh (Hezbollah) in Beqa' region, Oussama Saad (the Popular Nasserite Organisation) and Qassim Hashim (Arab Socialist Baath Party) in south Lebanon, Jihad Al-Samad ("Independent") and Faisal Karami (Arab Liberation Party) in north Lebanon, and Adnan Traboulsi (Al-Ahbash) and Fouad Makhzoumi (National Dialogue Party) in Beirut challenged the Future Movement leadership of the politics of the Sunni community in Lebanon (see, El-Amine 2018).

Some Sunni politicians attribute the declining popularity of the Future Movement to its perceived "*arrogance*" or "*reluctance*" to join forces with other Sunni groupings and organisations. The understanding of Sunni counterparts such as al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya, the Tawheed Movement, the League of Muslim Scholars, Political Salafists, Hizb ut-Tahrir and the Union Party is that the Future Movement often "*ignores*" or "*excludes*" other Sunni actors unless they operate under its umbrella. In their view, the Future Movement could have given other Sunnis a political platform, hence diversifying the Sunni politics. According to a Sunni MP, some Sunni actors sought an alliance with the Future Movement because they supported its anti-Hezbollah policies or simply to unify the Sunni political front against Hezbollah, but the Future Movement neutralised them. He argues that "*if the Future Movement aims to sustain its leadership on the Sunni politics, it should consider other Sunni actors and communicate with them*" (Author, 2019: 118-119).

These narratives by some Sunni politicians have been challenged by the Future Movement which indicate that it has never been their intention to monopolise the Sunni politics. In their view, "*if there is a better alternative to the Future Movement leadership, we will follow it. We are not monopolising the Sunni politics*". They further add that the Sunni politics has always been pluralistic, and everyone can compete for the political leadership of the Sunni politics (Author, 2019). The Future Movement does not have a militia like Hezbollah to monopolise the Sunni arena by force. If this were the case, Hezbollah would not have been able to overthrow the government of Saad Hariri (the head of the Future Movement) and endorse his rival Najib Mikati as a prime minister in 2011 (Author, 2019).

2. Lack of Trust for the Future Movement Leadership

The Future Movemet is often accused of being driven by *realpolitik* and not the principles of defending Sunnis (see Abdel-Latif, 2008; Imad, 2013; Rabil, 2014; Author, 2019). This was one of the causes for their declining popularity among Sunnis. One respondent aligned to the Political Salafists claims that *"the Future Movement… does not want to communicate with Sunnis except for what it serves its interests"* (Author, 2019:117). Similarly, a leader from the Tawheed Movement reiterates the claims that *"the Future Movement… wants to use Sunnis to serve the interest of its political project and not the interest of Sunnis... their project is based on instrumentalising Sunnis to gain political advantages"* (Author, 2019:117). Moreover, a senior leader from Hizb ut-Tahrir goes further to claim that the Future Movement is "*in hostility with Islam*" adding that *"it is false to classify the Future Movement as a group that represents the Lebanese Sunnis"* (Author, 2019:117).

The data however reveals that on several occasions the Future Movement relied on the support of Sunni religious grouping such as the Lebanese Salafists and al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya to achieve victories in the Lebanese parliament in 2005 and 2009 (Abdel-Latif, 2008; Rabil, 2014; Author, 2019). Whilst some Sunni groupings supported the Future Movement in search of political influence, financial support and Sunni solidarity, the Future Movement did it because of the social capital and mobilisation abilities of those groupings (Abdel-Latif, 2008). This kind of alliance occasionally backfires as some Sunnis feel that the Future Movement does not provide them with political cover when they need it (see Abdel-Latif,

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2008). On the contrary, when Sunni groups face problems with the Lebanese authorities or with Hezbollah, the Future Movement abandons them or keeps silent (see Abdel-Latif, 2009; Author, 2019).

3. Inconsistent Framing Constructions of the Future Movement

The credibility of the Future Movement framing constructions is contingent on the consistency between its articulated beliefs and its actions (see Snow and Benford, 2000; Author, 2019). In this research, some Sunni politicians suggest that the Future Movement deals with Hezbollah juxtaposes its anti-Hezbollah rhetoric. Two former Sunni MPs think that it is dishonest to oppose Hezbollah whilst participating in Lebanese governments that bends to Hezbollah's will and unjustly accuses Lebanese Sunnis of terrorism (Author, 2019:123).

A senior official from the Future Movement states that "*the Future Movement strike deals* [with Hezbollah] *not for its own interests but to protect Lebanon. Do you think that waging a war against Hezbollah is easy? Do you think that militarising Sunnis against Shias is easy? Neither us* [the Future Movement] *nor most Sunnis are convinced about militarisation. How can we send our people to death?*".

However, the data also reveals in the response of a prominent Sunni MP a counter-frame of the above quote indicating that the Future Movement typically "*spins*" its narratives on Hezbollah to fit its own agenda. He says that "*Sunnis are not calling for military confrontation with Hezbollah. However, the political confrontation with them (as led by the Future Movement) is below standard*". He further asks: "*why does the Future Movement form a government with Hezbollah while the latter intervene in Syria, generate Sunni Shia tensions, kill Syrian civilians and transfer terrorism from Syria to Lebanon*"? He deconstructs the frames that the Future Movement collaboration with Hezbollah is to ensure stability in Lebanon. In his view, the government should be made of specialists or "*technocrats*". Participating with Hezbollah in the same government means "*endorsing*", "*legitimising*" and "*normalising*" their activities. Sunni mistrust of the Future Movement agenda emanated from its frequent concessions to Hezbollah by giving them a president allied with them and a majority in the government. For example, in 2016, the Future Movement facilitated the election of Michel Aoun as president of Lebanon even though he is a close ally with Hezbollah in exchange for Saad Hariri becoming a prime minister of a "*national unity government*" (Lefèvre, 2017; Badran, 2021). However, the reality is that the government was dominated by groupings and leaders affiliated with Iran and Syria.

4.1.5 Injustice Frames of the Lebanese Sunni Actors

Injustice framing construction is defined as a "*mode of interpretation—prefatory to collective non-compliance, protest, and/or rebellion—generated and adopted by those who come to define the action of an authority as an unjust*" (Snow and Benford, 2000:615). In this research, injustice frames are socially constructed narratives by the Lebanese Sunni actors that an identifiable authority (state or non-state actors) are functioning in ways that lead to the suffering of the Sunni collectivity (see Gamson, 1992; Pickett and Ryon, 2017; Author, 2019).

After Rafik Hariri's assassination in 2005, the Sunni community was left without a strong leader (Salamey, 2014). The rising influence of Hezbollah (Shias) on state machinery only served to trigger injustice framing constructions among Sunnis. Unlike the other Lebanese groups which participated in the civil war (1975-1990), which were required to disarm soon after the war, Hezbollah was exempted from disarmament under the pretext of resisting Israel (Salem, 2011; Lefèvre, 2014a). Since then, Hezbollah maintained its military-cum-political supremacy in the Lebanese politics. On the contrary, the Sunni community felt marginalised within the Lebanese political system because of the absence of a counter Sunni force.

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In this article, injustice frames are constructed based on the political system in Lebanon. Within this system, Sunnis feel disadvantaged because of Hezbollah's (Shia) dominance on the state and the failure of their political leadership (the Future Movement) to improve their conditions. Injustice frames such as "*oppression*", "*humiliation*", "*marginalisation*", "*orphaned*", "*frustration*", "*anger*", "*leaderless*" and "*lost*" have been frequently invoked by some Sunni actors such as the Political Salafists, Hizb ut-Tahrir and al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya among others to describe the Sunni problematised situation in the post-Rafik Hariri era.

Political Salafists "*Sunnis are like <u>orphans</u>. No leadership is looking after them, they are <u>humiliated</u> and <u>marginalised</u> by Hezbollah. Neither Dar al-Fatwa nor the Future Movement revolted against the injustices facing the Sunnis community.*" (Author, 2019:107).

Hizb ut-Tahrir "*The Lebanese Sunnis are in a state of <u>frustration</u> because they feel that they have no leadership to protect them.*" (Author, 2019:107).

Al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya "*There is a growing <u>anger</u> in the Sunni community. They feel like they are <u>oppressed</u> in Lebanon.*" (Author, 2019:107).

Sunni MP "*Sunnis are <u>leaderless</u>. They are <u>lost</u>. They need a strong Sunni leadership that helps them navigate their way. They trusted the Future Movement, but it does not seem to represent them anymore*".

Some Sunni actors go further in their narratives to describe the Sunni community in Lebanon metaphorically as a "*minority*" even though it is the largest community in Lebanon demographically (Author, 2019). The assassination of Rafik Hariri (and other Sunni leaders) together with Hezbollah's metamorphosising into Lebanon strongest grouping has left the Sunni community perceives itself as a "*minority*" (Wehrey, 2017; Knudsen, 2020; Majed, 2020) and amplified its narratives on injustice. The animosity between Sunnis and Hezbollah hit a new peak after Hezbollah's military campaign in Syria led to the killing of Sunnis, hence exacerbating the Sunni Shia cleavages in Lebanon (Knudsen, 2020; Tınas and Özlem Tür, 2021). These events advanced the framing construction of Sunnis as "*minority*" as they feel that they are being targeted by Hezbollah regionally and domestically. This narrative is supported by a senior official from the Future Movement who admits that "*Hezbollah's dominance shifted the Sunni mindset from perceiving themselves as a major confession in Lebanon to the perception that they are a minority...*".

This perception leads some Sunni actors to re-construct their narratives on the political rivalry between Hezbollah and the Future Movement. In their view, the rivalry between Hezbollah and the Future Movement is not framed as a struggle between two opposing groupings in Lebanon. Rather, it is framed through confessional lenses as a struggle between Shias (Hezbollah) and Sunnis (the Future Movement). Therefore, it is unsurprising that a Political Salafist leader frames Hezbollah's activity as "*targeting the existence of Sunnis*" (Author, 2019:109), highlighting the portrayed confessional nature of the struggle between the Future Movement and Hezbollah and attributing Sunni grievances to the supremacy of the Shia community in Lebanon (see Di Peri, 2017; Hoffman and Bagdanov, 2020).

The issue of injustice frames is that they lead the Lebanese Sunni political actors to reconceptualise their mobilising narratives within the Sunni community as victims in the Lebanese confessional system. Eventually, they collectivise Sunni victimisation and galvanise them into collective actions (Gamson, 1992).

Arguably, the strength of the Sunni politicians framing constructions lies in their ability at times of contentious politics between Shias and Sunnis to create a sense of Sunni solidarity and to bolster anti-

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Shia narratives to garner the support of their Sunni constituency (see Abdel-Latif, 2008). The collective articulation of Sunni resentment because of Hezbollah's dominance and Sunni leadership disempowerment could bring salience to confessional "Sunni" identity vis-à-vis "national" or "Lebanese" identity and lead to the emergence of a "collectivity-cum-movement" (Johnston, 1994:284).

In the following, other issues of injustice frames within the Lebanese Sunni communities are presented.

Pauperising Sunnis

Sunni areas are branded as the most impoverished areas in Lebanon (Ghanem, 2021; Rabah, 2021). The International Poverty Centre (2008:10) reveals that in north Lebanon "*Tripoli City and the Akkar/Minieh-Dennieh strata* [which are mainly inhabited by Sunnis] *have the highest percentages of overall poverty*" whilst "*the Koura/Zagharta/Batroun/Bsharre* [which are mainly inhabited by Christians] *has a relatively low poverty rate*". Some Sunni respondents claim that key public facilites such as hospitals are more concentrated in non-Sunni areas than Sunni areas.

A prominent leader from the League of Muslim Scholars argues that "*unfortunately, Sunnis are the main targets of socioeconomic inequalities. There is a growth in non-Sunni areas and impoverishment in Sunni areas*". Similarly, a Sunni MP from the Future Movement reiterates that "*the Sunni areas are the most affected by poverty, whilst Shia areas, despite the dire situation in Lebanon, still functioning, because of Hezbollah's presence and the financial aid from Iran*". However, the findings of this research also give a plausible reason for the pauperisation of Sunnis, which is the perceived failure of Sunni leadership to invest in deprived Sunni areas in Lebanon (see Lefèvre, 2014; Henley, 2016; Knudsen, 2020). According to a Sunni MP: "*Sunni leaders think that their personal interests are more important than collective Sunni interests*". He emphatically emphasises that "*Sunni leaders are the ones who neglect the rights of Sunnis*".

Collectively, this feeling of abandonment on the part of the Sunni community in Lebanon paves the way for some Sunnis to turn away from the state and their leadership to find other alternatives (Ghanem, 2021). This include joining militant or radical Sunni groupings that provide services or joining illegal network in exchange for financial support. This happens at a time of apparent state negligence, Sunni leadership impotence, and Hezbollah complete dominance (Lefèvre, 2014a; Lefèvre, 2014b).

Marginalising Sunnis

Although the responsibility of the Lebanese state is to promote fair development for all the Lebanese communities regardless of their confessional affiliations, a segment of Sunnis feel that they are being abandoned by the state as opposed to other confessions and that the state is not doing enough to dispel those feelings. There is an impression among Sunnis that whilst the Taif Accord, which ended the Lebanese civil war, improved their political status, it did neither tackle imbalance of power among the Lebanese confessions nor counter socio-economic inequalities that some Sunnis are suffering from (see Lefèvre, 2014a; Vaughan, 2018).

One research participant aligned to the League of Muslim Scholars claims that "*Sunnis are constitutionally strong but socioeconomically marginalised*". However, a Sunni MP from the Future Movement denies the claims that Sunnis are marginalised, adding that "*the head of executive is a Sunni, and the head of Internal Security Forces is a* Sunni", which in theory means that Sunnis are strong. Yet, practically, he admits that Sunnis are under tremendous pressure. This is because of Hezbollah's impunity and the gradual disempowerment of Sunni leadership which create the impression that Sunnis are being marginalised.

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4.2 Reconstructing Inclusive Political Leadership in Lebanon

Drawing on the analyses above, this section explores possible avenues for reconstructing inclusive political leadership in Lebanon. The article focuses on providing impetus for the Lebanese political actors to begin a dialogue that puts collective national interests over communal self-interests. The following subheadings are arguably important in reconstructing inclusive political leadership in Lebanon.

Trust and Credibility

The article reveals that trust and credibility are essential in the political leadership of the Sunni community in Lebanon. Trust and credibility in the Sunni leadership are contingent on several factors including the ability of Sunni leaders to maintain viability and integrity of the Sunni collectivity against domestic and foreign threats, to maintain solidarity and collective identity, to minimise intra-Sunni conflict and dissension and to foster togetherness within the Sunni body politics.

Solidarity as a Means of Reconstructing Inclusive Political Leadership

A sense of solidarity is important for overcoming political differences (Author, 2019). Genuine commitment to unify the Sunni political leadership is likely to happen when the Sunni actors overcome identity politics and identify with the perceived injustices unleashed on the Sunni community in Lebanon. It is arguable that solidarity is a vital ingredient of the Sunni narratives, and its absence may pave the way for intra-Sunni contestations in Lebanon. A culture of Sunni solidarity (see Roth, 2000:302) is important to collectively deal with the injustice frames within the Sunni communities (see Owens and Aronson, 2000; Passy and Giugni, 2000; Taylor, 2000).

Managing Intra-Sunni Rivalry

Intra-Sunni rivalry encapsulates the essence of the Sunni politics in Lebanon (see Rancière, 2010). However, the difficult challenge that face the Sunni leadership is to find strategy that promote solidarity amidst diversity and operate as unifying forces without repressing differences among the Lebanese Sunnis (see Author, 2019). This implies that when intra-Sunni rivalry is operated effectively, differences could be considered a valuable tool for realignment and renewal with the Sunni body politics (see Painter-Morland, 2002; Rancière, 2010; Author, 2019).

Establishing Independent Electoral Commission

This article proposes the establishment of independent electoral commission to reconstruct inclusive political leadership in Lebanon. According to Hyson (2000:174), independent electoral commissions are the "*cornerstone of representative democracy*" (Hyson, 2000:174). They are important in areas of low administrative and deeply divided polities where there is a high possibility of mistrust among political communities (see Hartlyn and Mustillo, 2008). This is the typical case of Lebanon. It provides mechanisms to ensure impartial elections (see Hartlyn and Mustillo, 2008).

This article proposes a five- or seven-member commission with one person selected as the chairperson. A parliamentary committee comprising of members of different political parties are to be established to select trustworthy Lebanese to serve as commissioners of this commission (Author, 2019). The selection needs to be validated by the Lebanese constitution and cannot be revoked unless death, mandatory retirement, voluntary retirement, or stated misconduct on the part of the commissioners as established in the constitution.

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Prohibition of External Funding of Sunni Groupings

It appears, drawing on the responses of the research respondents, that foreign funding shapes the framing construction of political and religious leaders in Lebanon. If foreign funding is not checked, the politics of the various communities in Lebanon will be subjected to identity politics (see Author, 2019). It is important for political groupings in Lebanon to have corporate accounts and their accounting books audited regularly to check their expenditure and income status. This is vital for determining the sources of funding and how the income is utilised. This would potentially encourage political groupings to seek internal funding from within their constituency or supporters in the forms of donations, which can help make the Lebanese politics less polarising.

Dismantling the Confessional Political System in Lebanon

This article argues that for reconstructive political leadership in Lebanon to occur, urgent steps are needed to abandon the confessional system and hence, saving the future of Lebanon and its people. The years of practise of this type of political system in Lebanon shows that it does not promote genuine democracy and national cohesion hence the need to look for an alternative.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, this article aims to understand better how the Lebanese Sunni political actors construct their frames on the political and religious leadership of Sunnis and how those frames are operationalised. The perception among the research respondents is that the Sunni leadership is galvanising the Sunnis to serve its interests. Sunni problematised situation is arguably attributable to the failure of Sunni leadership, both political and clerical. This article argues for reconstruction of inclusive political leadership in Lebanon. This will enable the Lebanese to deconstruct identity politics and promote national cohesion and stability. It therefore recommends the establishment of independent electoral commissions, prohibition of foreign funding of political groupings, and dismantling of the confessional political system in Lebanon.

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