

Why do the Lebanese and Iraqi states continue to tolerate militias?



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Pro-Syrian “al-Baath Bridge” militia fighters fire at the Lebanese Force backed by Maronite Christian (Phalangist) party in Beirut on 18 August 1985. AFP



Jodor Jalit is a researcher of civil-military relations with a focus on the Global South, Director of the Graduate Program on South America-Arab Countries Relations at Universidad Nacional de Tres de Febrero, and founder Editor in Chief at El Intérprete Digital. He holds an M.A. in National Defense from Universidad de la Defensa Nacional, a B.A. in International Studies from Universidad Torcuato Di Tella, and a B.A. in Political Science from Armstrong Atlantic State University.

INTRODUCTION: STATE COLLAPSE AND THE RISE OF MILITIAS

The presence of militias in Lebanon and Iraq challenges the very premise upon which a modern state is based. In the words of the German sociologist Max Weber: “The modern state can be defined only sociologically by the specific means that are peculiar to it, as to every political organization: namely, physical violence¹.”

In other words, a monopoly on the use of violence is a necessary condition for the emergence and maintenance of the modern state. Therefore, the existence of Hezbollah, the Popular Mobilization Forces and Peshmerga challenges the very idea of modern Lebanese and Iraqi states.

The militias in Lebanon and Iraq first appeared in the context of domestic violence

and foreign intervention. The Lebanese state crumbled throughout the civil war between 1975 and 1989 because of domestic violence and foreign occupation. The Iraqi state collapsed when the US-led coalition invaded the country in March 2003.

The collapse of the Lebanese state included the dismemberment of the Lebanese Armed Forces between 1975 and 1977. In Iraq, the Coalition Provisional Authority ordered the Iraqi Armed Forces, among other security organizations, to be disbanded under Order Number 2.

In the years that followed these developments, many Lebanese and Iraqi paramilitary forces came into existence as communities took steps to protect themselves.

In Lebanon, the militias were closely associated with political forces that aimed to unify communal leadership and expand territorial control as a means to achieving greater leverage over the political system.

In Iraq, the militias were also closely associated with specific communities as



security providers, but simultaneously engaged in military operations against the occupying forces.

Now, Hezbollah is the only armed group that remains in Lebanon. In Iraq, the state has incorporated Peshmerga and the PMF.

The emergence of militias providing communal security in Lebanon and Iraq, against a backdrop of state collapse, did not in itself undermine the definition of a modern state. However, as both states reemerged as viable entities during the reconstruction years, the continuing presence of the militias became a problem.

While the Iraqi example appears to show that integration into the state might offer a solution, in Lebanon Hezbollah remains completely outside of the state and engages in foreign conflicts.

But whatever differences exist between these two cases, the question remains: Why do the Lebanese and Iraqi states continue to tolerate the militias?

This question raises two more: Do the

Lebanese and Iraqi armies have the capacity to disarm the militias? And can these states reclaim a monopoly over the use of violence?

STATE-SOCIETY RELATIONS IN CONSOCIATIONAL DEMOCRACIES

Lebanon and Iraq have similar political systems that are based on consociational democracy, a system founded on the sharing of power by diverse social groups. Or, in the words of Dutch-American political scientist Arend Lijphart, a “government by elite cartel designed to turn a democracy with a fragmented political culture into a stable democracy².”

Furthermore, consociational democracy transforms institutions into “arenas for contestation between competing members of the sectarian/political elite³.” That is to say, the empowerment of communal identities promotes political competition for control of state institutions. Most importantly, state-

Former Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga fighters walk near the citadel in Erbil, the capital of the autonomous Kurdish region of northern Iraq, as they head to a gathering to urge people to vote in the upcoming independence referendum on September 13, 2017.
AFP

society relations in Lebanon and Iraq are characterized by sectarian relations.

According to Fanar Haddad, a non-resident senior fellow at the Middle East Institute, “sectarian identity and sectarian relations operate on several fields or along several dimensions,” including religious doctrine, subnational, national and transnational.

At the national level, sectarian relations affect state-society relations through a power structure defined by an informal apportionment, or quota, system. For example, the 1946 Lebanese National Pact, described as a “verbal understanding” and “an unwritten gentlemen’s agreement⁴,” established a balance between the Christian and Muslim communities.

The Monthly, a magazine published by Information International, a Beirut-based research and consultancy firm, reported that the communal balance goes beyond the Christian-Muslim divide, is a common feature in all Lebanese governments formed after the 1989 Taif agreement, and that “some ministries have gradually become confined to specific sects⁵.”

The Iraqi political system has no equivalent agreement but, Haddad notes, “at the level of political elites, ethno-sectarian muhasasa and the political shares accorded to ‘Sunnis,’ ‘(Shiites)’ and ‘Kurds’ are, for the moment, reified and minimally contested⁶.”

In addition, researcher and security expert Florence Gaub noted a quota system in the second post-2003 government, as “Minister of Defense Abdul Qadr was a Sunni Arab; Iraqi Armed Forces Chief of Staff Babakir Zebari, a Kurd; and his deputy, Nasier Abadi, a (shiite) Arab⁷.” The power-sharing structures adopted are evident.

In Lebanon, the presidency and command of the Lebanese Armed Forces is reserved for a Christian Maronite; the defense ministry and directorship of the General Directorate of State Security for a representative of the Greek Orthodox community; the premiership and directorship of the Internal Security Forces for a Sunni Muslim; the parliamentary speakership and directorship of the General Security Directorate for a Shiite Muslim; and the generalship of the chief of staff for a Druze.

Moreover, all three public-security institutions — the SSD, ISF and GSD — are part of the Ministry of Interior and



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Municipalities, a post that is never occupied by a Shiite and is “distributed among Sunni, Maronite and Greek Orthodox, but it might become restricted to Sunni⁸.” The Shiite community traditionally held one post in the General Staff and the Higher Defense Council.

Likewise, the Iraqi premiership has traditionally been exercised by a Shiite and, most recently, the presidency by a Kurd, while the parliamentary speakership is exercised by a Sunni. The Ministry of Defense has also been led by a Sunni and, since 2017, the chief of staff of the Iraqi Armed Forces by a Shiite. While the president and the prime minister have the power to take the country to war, only the latter has powers of command.

The Shiite community in Iraq appears to have a greater command role within the state-security apparatus compared with the Shiite community in Lebanon.

The recent history of political instability in the two countries casts doubt on the effectiveness of consociational government. For example, Lebanon went multiple periods without a cabinet after ministers withdrew in 2011 in opposition to the Special Tribunal for Lebanon investigating the assassination of former prime minister Rafik Hariri⁹. Additionally, a lack of political consensus led to a two-and-a-half-year presidential vacancy at the end of Michel Suleiman’s mandate in May 2014¹⁰.

Meanwhile, the Iraqi parliament has recently completed three rounds of negotiations over a period of six months without managing to elect a president¹¹.

Political scientist Arend Lijphart sets out four requirements that must be met by ruling elites seeking to operate a consociational democracy: The “ability to accommodate the divergent interests and demands of the subculture (and) to transcend cleavages and to join in a common effort with the elites of rival subcultures ... Commitment to the maintenance of the system and to the improvement of its cohesion and stability (and an ability to) understand the perils of political fragmentation¹².”

It can be argued that both the Lebanese and Iraqi governing elites meet the second requirement in full, but the third only partially. In other words, they invest in cross-sectional governing coalitions to retain the

control over state resources that is granted by the political system.

In summary, consociational democracy in Lebanon and Iraq produces sectarian state-society relations. By placing communal identities at the center of political contestation, the state falls prey to a governing elite cartel more interested in controlling state resources than political stability. That is, state resources allocated to institutional development are employed to serve the interests of communities.

Consequently, the Lebanese and Iraqi states are deprived of strong institutions, and the armed forces are no exception.

CIVIL-MILITARY RELATIONS IN LEBANON AND IRAQ

The literature on civil-military relations in the Arab region has preoccupied itself with the occurrence of coup d'états, the durability of autocratic regimes, and military institutional development^{13 14 15}. Briefly stated, it addresses the power relations between civil and military authorities, the endurance of military-led regimes, and military modernization. Moreover, the presence of militias implies a unique type of civil-military relations¹⁶ and, for the same reason, Lebanon and Iraq are treated as outlier cases¹⁷. Nevertheless, the classical literature offers one explanation for the endurance of militias in these two countries.

The American political scientist Samuel Huntington established the discipline's first theoretical framework in "The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations." The author proposed to solve the political tension between the civil and military spheres through "objective civilian control" to maximize military professionalism.

In his words, objective civilian control "is that distribution of political power between the military and civilian groups which is most conducive to the emergence of professional attitudes and behavior among the members of the officer corps¹⁸." Thus, the military will be stripped of political power and turned into an instrument of the state.

The Lebanese and Iraqi states have indeed pursued military professionalization. However, consociational democracy maximizes civilian control over state

institutions. Consequently, civilian control over the military becomes subjective by default, because the power-sharing structure agreed by the governing elite cartel empowers civilian groups.

For example, the political authority over the military in Lebanon is distributed according to sectarian relations between, firstly, Christians and Muslims, and secondly, 18 other recognized communities. Thus, political authority over the Lebanese military (commander in chief, minister of defense, and commander of the Lebanese Armed Forces) is predominantly Maronite Christian and Greek Orthodox, while the powers of war reside at the Council of Ministers and Higher Defense Council, traditionally composed of members of four communities: Maronite Christian, Greek Orthodox, Sunni and Shiite.

In Iraq, political authority over the military and the powers of war has been concentrated in the Sunni and Shiite communities since 2005.

As a consequence, the military institution in Lebanon has been turned into an arena "for contestation between competing members of the sectarian/political elite¹⁹," while in Iraq "the military had become a sectarian and inefficient institution."

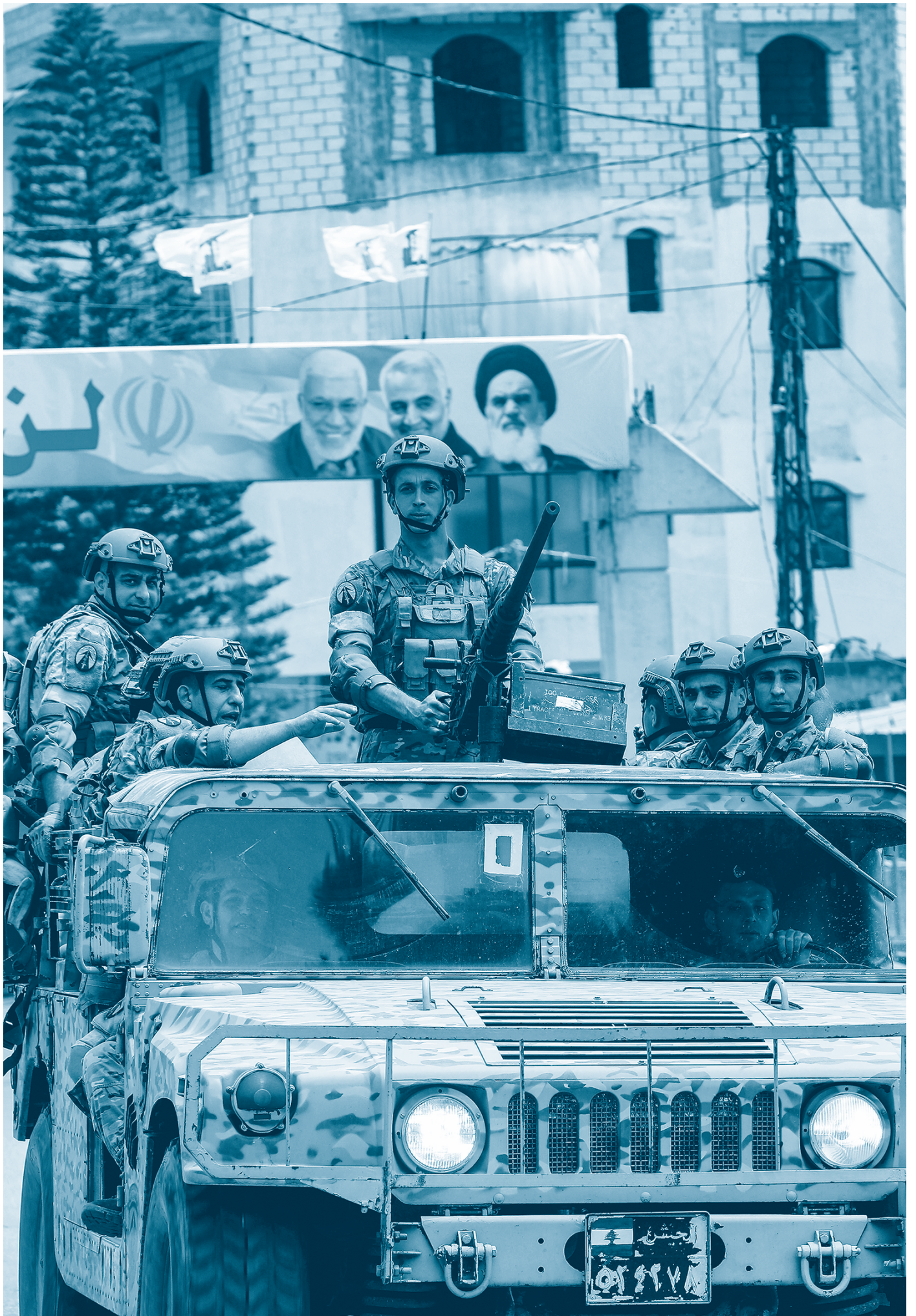
In other words, military professionalism as defined by Huntington and/or Morris Janowitz remains elusive.

The impact of subjective civil control over the armed forces in Lebanon and Iraq goes beyond a theoretical, less-than-optimal level of military professionalism, and also affects military performance on the ground.

Take, for example, the military investment by the US in the Lebanese and Iraqi armed forces, and the performance of both against the terrorist organization, Daesh. Washington invested more than \$2.5 billion in the Lebanese Armed Forces between 2006 and 2021, and since 1970 has trained 6,000 military personnel²⁰.

In Iraq, between 2005 and 2013 the US provided \$14 billion in equipment, services and training, in addition to investing \$1.25 billion in military financing, \$4.1 million in International Military Education and Training, \$16.3 billion in active government-to-government sales, More than \$689 million in defense articles to Iraq via Direct Commercial Sales, and \$5 billion for the fight against Daesh²¹.

Lebanese army vehicles drive past a Hezbollah banner with text in Arabic reading "the flag will not fall" and showing the faces of the late (R to L) Islamic Republic of Iran's founder Imam Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the head of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)'s "Quds Force" Qasem Soleimani, and the head of Iraq's Popular Mobilisation Forces Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis. AFP



Despite the sums invested, however, both armies enlisted the assistance of militias to defeat Daesh.

Three instances serve as examples: The Qalamoun Offensive in 2017, when the Lebanese Armed Forces coordinated military operations with Hezbollah²²; and the battles of Kirkuk (2015) and Mosul (2017), when the Iraqi Armed Forces received support from the PMF and Peshmerga respectively^{23 24}.

These events do not argue against providing military assistance but reveal a second dimension to the less-than-optimal level of professionalism achieved by the Lebanese and Iraqi armed forces.

To summarize, institutional development in the form of military professionalism falls short due to the empowerment of communities and subjective civil-control characteristics of consociational democracies in Lebanon and Iraq.

Further, the impact of consociational democracy is evident in a less-than-optimal military performance by the armed forces of both countries. Most importantly, it deprives the state of a key tool for disarming militias and reclaiming a monopoly over the use of force.

CONCLUSION: STATE TOLERANCE OR WEAKNESS?

It has been argued that consociational democracy in Lebanon and Iraq produces sectarian state-society relations, poor civil-military relations, and less-than-optimal levels of military professionalism. That is to say, the central roles of communities in political contestation leads to subjective civil control over the military and, consequently, deprives the armed forces of their role as the state's instrument for securing a monopoly over use of violence.

The Lebanese and Iraqi states do not tolerate militias but lack the means to combat them. Even with high levels of investment,

neither the Lebanese nor the Iraqi armed forces were able to defeat Daesh without the help of militias.

This suggests that although investment might help to secure the military capabilities required to defeat a militia, it cannot in itself resolve the social anxiety created by a segregated security apparatus. In turn, excluded communities might feel a need for militias to provide security.

The Iraqi state proposed a solution to the problem of militias by incorporating them into the state's own security apparatus. The problem remains unsolved, however, because the Peshmerga and PMF militias operate outside the regular chain of military command.

Therefore, and from a traditional perspective, it might be argued that the state did not recover a monopoly over the use of force, and security remains segregated as each force responds to specific communal interests.

Most troubling, and in parallel to Hezbollah's intervention in Syria, the Peshmerga and PMF might find incentives in sectarian relations to becoming involve in armed conflicts abroad.

Overall, this inability to disarm militias and monopolize the use of violence, in the context of consociational democracies in the Arab region, reveals institutional state weakness.

Finally, there is the issue of the role of militias within a consociational democracy. From a critical perspective, it might be argued that the militias in Lebanon and Iraq are a consequence of negotiations within the governing elite cartel, under the auspices of consociational democracy.

In other words, the elimination of militias in Lebanon and Iraq might not be possible without reforming the political systems and creating an inclusive security apparatus that addresses most, if not all, communal security concerns.



The Shiite community in Iraq appears to have a greater command role within the state-security apparatus compared with the Shiite community in Lebanon.

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