

# The Lebanese Syndrome: Maintaining the System, & Depleting the Resources

Mr. Jawad Adra has prepared this paper on corruption

## Stats&#

**34** financial institutions, 9 intermediate financial institutions, 384 exchanges, 64 banks, and 920 bank branches are the numbers of institutions constituting the financial sector in Lebanon as of the beginning of 2006.

**920,000** is the total number of registered school (primary and secondary) students in Lebanon for the 2005–2006 academic year.

**57,750** is the average number of individuals by which the Lebanese population has grown for each of the last five years (2001–2005), during which time the average birth rate was 74,970 per year and the average mortality rate was 17,221 per year.

**8.2 million** square meters is the total area licensed for construction projects in Lebanon in 2005, compared to 9 million square meters in 2004, with the governorate of Mount Lebanon hosting the largest area licensed for construction projects at 3.4 million square meters.

**6,500** is the total number of lawyers registered in Beirut (approximately 0.17% of the total population of Lebanon), compared to 200,000 lawyers registered in the Egyptian capital Cairo (approximately 0.28% of Egypt's population).

## Part 1: Crisis of Identity and the Role of Zu'ama'a

"Corruption" is one of the main concerns and challenges faced by Lebanon today. Some observers believe that it is a new phenomenon caused by the civil war and the Syrian influence, and preserved by a corrupt political class. This paper argues that what has been characterized as "corruption" is in fact a syndrome, a state of mind and an integral part of the prevalent social behavior, as a result of overpowering conditions. A general survey of some of the causes, symptoms and costs, will be presented to shed light on this phenomenon.

This behavior is the result of a tribal confessional system that has prevented the building of a modern nation state, in which the Zu'ama'a (local bosses) are stronger than the tribe, the tribe stronger than the confession, and the confession stronger than the state. It is characterized by constant tribal symbols such as the Zu'ama'a and the A'ian and a particular value system as to what is right and what is wrong. The major players, in the absence of a nation state and a strong central power, forge alliances with foreign powers to advance their own interests, thus inviting foreign interference, which in turn aggravates the situation and further hinders the build up of a nation state. This paper further argues that the Lebanese system is resilient and sustainable at high financial, environmental and human costs. Consequently, the calls for reform and good governance, be it from the U.N., World Bank, local and international NGOs or some foreign powers, become mere rhetoric, in the absence of a bottom up approach that tackles the genuine causes of the existence and continuity of the conditions.

An historical overview is crucial to understand the mechanics of the Lebanese system and demonstrate that "corruption" is not foreign to it but is rather an essential ingredient of the system itself. What could be argued for Lebanon applies to the region as a whole, since it witnessed the same political events starting with the Ottoman rule, and the enforcement of the Sykes-Picot Agreement and the Balfour Declaration. William M. Thomson describes the region's society in his book *The Land and the Book*\*

"The various religions and sects live together, and practice their conflicting superstitions in close proximity, but the people do not coalesce into one homogeneous community, nor they regard each other with fraternal feelings. The Sunnites excommunicate the Shiites – both hate the Druse, and all three detest the Nusayriyeh. The Maronite have no particular love for anybody, and in turn, are disliked by all. The Greek cannot endure the Greek Catholics – all despises the Jews. No other country in the world, I presume, has such multiplicity of antagonistic races ... They can never form one united people, never combine for any important religious or political purpose; and will therefore remain weak, incapable of self – government, and exposed to the invasions and oppressions of foreigners. Thus it has been, is now, and must long continue to be – a people divided, meted out, and trodden down"<sup>(1)</sup>.

Thomson is generally correct in his description of the divisions existing in the region's communities, including Lebanon. Different factions have identified themselves along confessional lines prior to the rise of modern Lebanon, and continued to do so after the creation of the Greater Lebanon in 1920, resulting in a permanent crisis of identity and a state of suspicion and fear among the various sects. The political power that religious institutions and Zu'ama'a enjoy, their control of the civil affairs, and their unwillingness to allow the emergence of a civil law contributed to sustaining and aggravating this crisis, strengthening the confessional system, and extending its influence and control to all socio-economic and political aspects of the Lebanese lives. A poll conducted by **Information International** revealed that 34% of those surveyed stated that they belonged to Lebanon first, compared to 37.3% who answered that they belonged to their confession, while 22.3% said that their sense of belonging to their country and to their confession was equal. However when asked which allegiance would come first in the case of conflict, the percentage of citizens who had previously said their sense of belonging to the country was most important decreased to 27.2%, while the percentage of those who felt equal allegiance to their country and their confession fell to 17.6%. Meanwhile, the percentage of surveyed citizens who said their confession came first increased to 48.8%<sup>(2)</sup>. The problem is therefore that of identity, allegiances and the formation or lack of state authority its symbols, instruments and its legitimacy.



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this paper in 6 parts.

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Taef Lebanon**

*\* It is worth noting that at the time of Thomson's writing, Europe witnessed problems of sectarianism, including discrimination against the Jews, while the Jews were considered to be an integral part of the region. Thomson does not mention the role of external factors.*

<sup>(1)</sup> Thomson, 1858, p.: 168–169  
*Thomson, W.M. 1858 The land and the Book New York: Harper & Brothers.*

<sup>(2)</sup> *Information International survey in August 2005 for Center of Democracy and Rule of Law.*