

# **CONFLICT IN CITIES AND THE CONTESTED STATE**

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### **Power-Sharing and Research in Divided Societies: A Rough Guide to Collecting Evidence in Belfast and Beirut**

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**Editorial note**

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**Biographical note**

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# **Power-Sharing and Research in Divided Societies: A Rough Guide to Collecting Evidence in Belfast and Beirut**

**Michael Kerr**

**Abstract:** This paper examines the complexities of comparing and contrasting the use of consociation as a means of regulating political conflicts in Northern Ireland and Lebanon. Based on research experience in Belfast and Beirut, it highlights some of the difficulties researchers face in seeking to analyse contested states by conducting fieldwork and collecting evidence in their political capitals. Placing these two divided societies in their historical context, the paper draws lessons from their recent power-sharing ventures. It does so within the conceptual framework of the ongoing debate about consociationalism and the promotion of power-sharing through third party intervention, as a means of bringing together parties that hold contradictory nationalist claims to the state itself or the political form it should take.

**Keywords:** consociation, conflict regulation, divided societies, external intervention,  
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*Turning and turning in the widening gyre  
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;  
The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
Are full of passionate intensity.*

**W.B. Yeats: The Second Coming**

## **Introduction**

By examining the recent consociational experiences of Northern Ireland (1) and Lebanon (2), this paper highlights some of the tangible difficulties in conducting research and collecting evidence in divided societies. Drawing lessons from fieldwork experience in the divided cities of Belfast and Beirut (3), it concludes that while the

external variables that influence the implementation of power-sharing may fluctuate according to international strategic concerns, the role of third party actors is fundamental to how successful consociation may be in managing ethno-national conflicts. The integrity and continuity of consociational government in these two cases is largely dependent on the relationship between those sharing power and the external powers that brought about that form of government. The external linkage politics of consociation are shown to be critical in judging the effectiveness of power-sharing as a means of regulating ethno-national conflict. In doing so, the paper also outlines many of the practical difficulties researchers face in their endeavours to circumnavigate the political 'spin' and secrecy that characterise peace processes, and to obtain reliable evidence by interviewing political elites.

Theoretical debate over the use of consociation as a tool for stabilising deeply divided societies has long been polarised. On one side there are those who support interventionist, third party led, 'top down' models such as democratic consociational government and, on the other, those who favour a more 'grassroots', integrationist, 'bottom up' approach to conflict regulation (4). There remains much disagreement over how effective this model has been and how its success or failure might be measured. Analysing Northern Ireland and Lebanon's parallel political processes through a comparative framework, indicates that external variables will largely determine whether these seemingly intractable ethnic conflicts can be regulated or resolved through power-sharing agreements in the long-term. The external dimension to these conflicts makes it particularly difficult for researchers to judge or measure the extent to which Arend Lijphart's internal variables, such as a history or culture of power-sharing between elites, influence the success or failure rate of consociation (5).

For example, Northern Ireland has only a very recent history of power-sharing originating from the short-lived Sunningdale Executive of 1974 (6). Northern Ireland's failed consociational initiatives of the 1970s followed the prorogation of the unionist dominated Stormont Parliament (7). Having accepted that withdrawal was an unfeasible policy option, Labour Prime Minister, James Callaghan, pursued a policy of 'containment' or 'Ulsterisation' (8). The aim of this was to reduce political violence through harsh security measures and the 'criminalisation' of those who engaged in political violence, thereby limiting the role of the British Army in the IRA's war against the British state. Conservative Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, continued Labour's hard-hitting approach of limiting the conflict to what had become known as 'an

acceptable level of violence' (9). The Thatcher government appeared as equally determined as its predecessor to maintain a security situation where violence in Britain was minimised and the vast majority of people in Northern Ireland were able to conduct their daily lives physically and economically unaffected. Thatcher subsequently returned to an Anglo-Irish framework, which eventually led to the re-introduction of the idea of employing some form of power-sharing to regulate Northern Ireland's troubles. So successful has the recent intergovernmental management of its ethno-national conflict been that the implementation of the 1998 Belfast Agreement is now often lauded as a 'best practice case' in conflict regulation (10). Of course, this merely represents a case of 'best practice' that has occurred under the rubric of the European Union and with the support of the US (11).

Conversely, the Lebanese tradition of inter-confessional power-sharing was carried forward from Ottoman times and became institutionalised in modern form during the inter-war period under the French Mandate. But divisions emerged over what national character the state of Lebanon would adopt. The Maronite Christians viewed Lebanon as a Western-oriented state, historically distinct from the Arab lands surrounding it. This set them apart from their Sunni Arab compatriots, many of whom championed Greater Syrian and pan-Arab nationalism. When Lebanon gained independence in 1943 through a British sponsored Christian-Muslim National Pact, which set out to regulate these divisions, the old, pre-national, pluralist traditions of its mountain-dwelling communities already formed the constitutional foundation of the state (12). But whereas Northern Ireland by 2009 was on the verge of consolidating the political stability brought to its divided society through the 1998 Belfast Agreement, Lebanon's communities remained gripped by the fear of another round of its unresolved civil war. This is partly because the 1989 Ta'if Agreement, which marked an end to Lebanon's fifteen year civil war, lay unimplemented under Syrian rule (1990-2005). It is also partly due to the fact that exogenous factors subsequently exacerbated the inter-communal tensions that Ta'if failed to resolve.

There has been no census taken in Lebanon since 1932, when the Shi'a represented twenty per cent of the population. Having since experienced obvious demographic and geographic changes, their historical position as Lebanon's third political community appears outdated and their self perceived status as third class citizens in Lebanese society has sharpened recent social and political confrontations. The Shi'a community remain an outlier in Lebanon's political system due to Hizballah's political-military duality and the propensity of the Islamic militants to act

outside of that system at the behest of Iran and Syria. Conflict erupted between Israel and Hizballah in the summer of 2006, but prior to that Lebanon's government struggled to hold together the country's consociational fabric in the political vacuum created by Syria's military withdrawal of 2005 (13). In an effort to resolve this crisis, the Lebanese Government and an unelected committee of different confessional leaders engaged in a process of National Dialogue. However, this proved incapable of adjusting the country's power-sharing framework in a way that satisfied all of its major communities and their external backers. As has so often been the case, Lebanon's inter-confessional polarisation was shaped by external geopolitical concerns. This time its communities aligned themselves with states vying for regional dominance after the US/UK invasion of Saddam Hussein's Iraq in 2003. The country was split between two camps - a pro-Syrian/Iranian alliance comprising the unusual partnership of the Shi'a Hizballah and Christian leader, General Michel Aoun, pitted against a pro-Hariri/anti-Syrian coalition made up of Sunnis, Christians and Druze. Those falling into the pro-Hariri camp looked to the US for support whilst those in the pro-Hizballah camp leaned towards Iran and Syria. These divisions remained in place and defined the 2009 parliamentary elections, reinforcing the view that no future stabilisation of Lebanon's inter-communal political divisions will be possible outside the rubric of a regional agreement that resolves or regulates these international tensions.

### **The external linkage politics of Northern Ireland and Lebanon**

Belfast and Beirut are sister cities that 'enjoy' a lot in common. Each has borne the physical brunt of state and nation building failures. And over the last four decades, both have captivated the world's attention by providing a stage for civil war, seemingly unbridgeable inter-ethnic divisions, and complex internationally brokered political compromises. Despite their recent violent history, both divided capitals are equally accessible centres for studying internationally led conflict regulation processes. As comparative case studies, they provide rich pickings for any researcher who seeks to develop an understanding of civil war and ethnic conflict regulation in a comparative context. Collecting evidence in societies broken down by the ravages of protracted ethno-national disputes, where the spectre of civil war is never far from the surface of political or social life may, at first glance, seem a daunting task and one that should be undertaken with limited expectations. With respect to their most recent and ongoing inter-communal troubles, the examples of Northern Ireland and Lebanon certainly provide ample challenges, an array of historical paradoxes and something of a 'rough guide' to conducting fieldwork in two

extremely diverse yet, intimately familiar, political environments. Researchers conducting fieldwork in Belfast or Beirut can at times feel that they are experiencing a 'trial by error' or a 'baptism of fire' but, as in any discipline, practitioners soon become aware of the pitfalls they face. In conducting such comparative analysis, it is important to pause and consider what lessons can be learnt from the research exercise and how one should go about that learning process.

What is particularly instructive in this endeavour is developing an awareness of the political, cultural and historical factors that differentiate Northern Ireland and Lebanon, as they are at least as informative as the similarities that exist between the two divided societies. In many respects, these discrepancies hold quite the opposite implications of what one might expect to discover in comparing a polity in a stable democratic environment with one entrenched in a region polarised by inter-state conflict and dominated by authoritarian regimes. So from the outset, it must be noted that Northern Ireland and Lebanon are situated in two fundamentally different geo-political settings. One was of little significance in international affairs following the Second World War, while the other became a critical strategic battleground in the Arab-Israeli conflict, the Cold War and the post-September 11 struggle for influence that the Middle East is currently experiencing. Geographic differences make the comparative analysis problematic on certain practical levels. For example, the external influences affecting Lebanon's political system are varied and subject to change, whereas those shaping or influencing Northern Ireland's inter-communal relations are more static, predictable and, in recent times, coordinated. However, it proves highly beneficial in helping us put the power-sharing model to the test. As a contested region within the UK that borders the Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland is sandwiched between two stable democracies. These neighbouring states are geographically situated within, albeit on the periphery of, the European Union and are bound closely through multi-faceted political, economic, social and cultural ties. In terms of Anglo-Irish relations, politicians and diplomats working in Dublin and London today have never had it so good. Yet, ironically, it is Lebanon rather than Northern Ireland that has a history of democratic power-sharing, something which is quite remarkable given the regional and international conflicts that have marked its political experience since independence.

Lebanon is far less fortunate than Northern Ireland given its proximity to non-democratic regimes and destabilising external influences. Israel is its closest democratic neighbour and Syria, until the recent interventions of the US and Iran, its

most influential external patron. The question of how the state might become 'the Switzerland of the Middle East' and remain neutral from regional conflicts has been at the core of debates in Beirut's cafes since Lebanon's inception. Commentators have long lamented the inability of the Lebanese to insulate themselves politically from the negative impacts of Cold War, Arab-Israeli, inter-Arab and post-Cold War conflicts in the Middle East. James Anderson has argued that it may not be 'good fences' that 'make good neighbours', as is often suggested, but actually the neighbours themselves (14), and this raises the question of whether or not a degree of political stability within a turbulent region would effectively force reasonableness and responsibility upon the state actors within it. Lebanon has always had 'weak fences' and predatory neighbours. Having gained independence through a power-sharing agreement between Christian and Muslim elites - premised on foreign policy neutrality - the difficulty in evaluating inter-confessional power-sharing in Lebanon as both a form of government and a method of ethnic conflict regulation is apparent. Any analysis of its power-sharing system that focuses solely on the internal variables that determine the outcome of its political discourse can only paint part of the picture. The fact, however, that Lebanon maintained its sovereignty and a degree of independence after 1943 - through the national crisis at the end of Camille Chamoun's presidency in 1958 and up to the outbreak of civil war in 1975 - provides evidence of the durability of the power-sharing model in regulating conflict, and in the most testing of circumstances in one of the world's most unstable regions. The fact that the state of Lebanon and its inter-confessional National Pact were established before the birth of Israel in 1948 adds credence to this view.

Another obvious difference between Northern Ireland and Lebanon is the great discrepancy in the level of intensity in their respective conflicts and the number of people that were either killed or injured as a result of this violence. Northern Ireland suffered over 3,700 deaths in the course of its most recent troubles (15). When compared to Lebanon's experience of a civil war with multifaceted international dimensions, which drew in surrounding state and non-state actors before destroying the state, the benefit of Northern Ireland's proximity to democratic states in containing its troubles is all the more obvious. It is estimated that up to 80,000 people were killed or, missing and presumed dead, as a result of the conflicts taking place within its borders from 1975-1987, and thousands more in the years that followed (16).

In Lebanon, war initially broke out between Maronite Christians and non-Lebanese Palestinian nationalists, before long held internal political, economic, social and cultural divisions saw the state disintegrate into full-scale civil war. This collapse hastened the intervention of neighbouring states and non-state actors, some of which seriously attempted to settle the war to their own advantage (US/ Israel/ USSR/ Syria), pursued proxy wars on Lebanese soil (Egypt/ Libya/ Iraq/ Iran/ Israel/ Syria/ US/ USSR/ PLO) or maintained a balance between the Lebanese factions so as to ensure that no solution could be implemented without its explicit support or acquiescence (Syria). In fact, there was actually a momentary alignment of US, Israeli and Syrian interests in Lebanon in 1976, when all three states sought to reduce the autonomy of the PLO, which US Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, viewed as an aspect to the tragedy of Lebanon (17). The US, Syria, Iran, and Israel have all historically viewed Lebanon as expendable in the pursuit of their regional strategic interests. The collapse of constitutional government under the National Pact in 1975 allowed Lebanon to become a thoroughfare for intra-Arab, Arab-Israeli, Palestinian, and great power rivalries. This remains so today. It is inspiring that a 'too close to call' general election was held in the Middle East in 2009. But it is characteristic of Lebanon that the issues at stake were, at least on the surface, presented in terms of the regional and international conflicts that provide the backdrop for inter and intra elite Lebanese rivalries. The problem for Lebanon remains that whilst the US has no great interest in Lebanon, for Iran, Syria and Israel it remains of critical importance to their long-term strategic concerns.

As the Belfast Agreement saw the British and Irish governments revisit and build upon the Sunningdale formula in an attempt to regulate the Northern Ireland conflict, war in Lebanon was meant to end with a return to power-sharing under the Ta'if Accords of 1989 (18). This institutionalised a redistribution of power between Lebanon's communities, which had effectively been agreed between its traditional ruling elites in January 1976. Syria was tasked with acting as both interpreter and guarantor during Ta'if's implementation process. But while nothing was agreed before everything was agreed between the parties to the Belfast Agreement, Lebanon's delegates at Ta'if were by and large presented with a *fait accompli*. Having played the role of gamekeeper throughout much of Lebanon's civil war, Ta'if internationally legitimised Syria's political and military position within Lebanon. What remained uncertain in 1989 was the extent to which it could dominate the state it was mandated to reconstruct.

So the endgame in Northern Ireland and Lebanon was very different. Syria was the clear winner to Lebanon's fifteen year war. In contrast, no British Government was ever determined to win a war that would end political violence in Northern Ireland. British Prime Minister Tony Blair's new Labour administration eagerly endeavoured to repackage the old Sunningdale formula after the Provisional IRA's leadership had reached the conclusion that its conflict lay primarily with the unionist community and not with the government of the state to which it was attached. In fact, by the time the conflict petered out, the British Government largely controlled, as opposed to contained, political violence in Northern Ireland, so successful had its intelligence services been in penetrating republican and loyalist paramilitary organisations.

In stark contrast to Northern Ireland, Lebanon's experience highlights the absence of positive and proactive external conflict managers, acting without selfish strategic or economic interests during its relentless war. It was only because no external actor proved capable of dominating the country through its local protégés, and the threat Lebanon posed to regional stability at the end of the Cold War, that an international agreement was finally reached to end its conflicts. Individually or collectively, the Lebanese factions had very little power to influence the outcome of this process.

It is clear that dissonant Anglo-Irish relations and the domestic weakness that British and Irish government's experienced in the early 1970s minimised the likelihood of power-sharing arrangements - such as the 1973 Sunningdale Agreement or the emergency voluntary coalition envisaged during the 1975 Constitutional Convention - successfully bringing about the political stability necessary to end republican and loyalist violence. In 1998, a more harmonious approach by domestically secure British and Irish governments saw a cessation of violence create an environment in which a settlement could be negotiated. However, it was not just the weak domestic positions of the two governments that undermined their approach to Northern Ireland's first peace process. Neither government held an overriding interest in the establishment of power-sharing between unionists and nationalists. The Irish viewed power-sharing as a means to establish all-Ireland bodies that would set in train an evolutionary process from which a united Ireland would be the logical conclusion. In the 1970s, the British principally saw power-sharing as a method of reducing political violence, ending direct rule from Westminster and effectively disengaging from Irish politics and the quagmire of its unresolved disputes. Two decades later, it was a robust twin-track intergovernmental approach that brought about republican and loyalist ceasefires, after the 1993

Downing Street Declaration laid the foundations for a return to the power-sharing model. Conversely, those states intervening in Lebanon's civil war generally did so simply to further their own geopolitical interests in the Arab-Israeli conflict and the Cold War. Today the logic behind third party intervention in Lebanon remains the same, as it is primarily motivated by the question of whether Lebanon will 'go east' or 'go west' in the ongoing struggle for the Middle East - in which Lebanon is again a key pawn.

### **Collecting evidence in Belfast and Beirut**

The exogenous linkage politics that are prevalent in these two cases, and which often heavily influence inter-ethnic relations in divided societies, pose considerable challenges to those collecting evidence. It is difficult for the researcher to gain access to official material or in-depth interviews that reveal the interests, incentives and motivations of all the states acting as protagonists or antagonists in an ethnic conflict. Furthermore, those acting as managers or promoting political strategies that seek to bring about an end to armed conflict are generally far more willing to elaborate on the 'official' version of events and consequently take credit for the success of their approach to conflict regulation or apportion blame to others who do not share their interests or core values. Framing research on a contemporary conflict in a historical context can easily upset the 'official narrative' of a peace process, which is something almost all parties to Northern Ireland's most recent negotiations have been keen to avoid.

Lebanon has been a hub of political and cultural discourse throughout its modern history and its tendency to facilitate dialogue is not easily suppressed. Most Lebanese politicians view assisting foreign researchers in their endeavour to understand its political system as something that is in their national or communal interest. For them, it is a worthwhile exercise in having their story told, or at least a part of it, even if it is under the objective spotlight of academic scrutiny. But whilst foreign researchers may find Lebanese politicians and officials from all communities very accessible, they will not find their Syrian political masters in Damascus or Beirut forthcoming, and may struggle to even speak to their Iranian or Saudi counterparts, discover who they are, or find out what their influence actually is. For many of those foreign states intervening in Lebanon, negotiation and political deal making is not something they engage in openly, nor feel any need to get involved in as a means of legitimising their position through any sort of rigorous public scrutiny. Unsurprisingly, a culture of political openness does not exist at governmental level in the Arab World.

Instead, there is a carefully choreographed presentation of political processes at their critical junctures, which makes it difficult for researchers to establish the facts and gather the detail of any negotiations. For example, the Ta'if negotiations took place behind closed doors, under the auspices of US/Saudi mediation, and amidst allegations of bribery, before an agreement was presented to the media and finally the Lebanese people. In such instances, researchers may interview as many of those involved in the process as possible, try to persuade them to provide a detailed account of what actually took place, and piece together a picture of events from this information. One exception to this rule is the recent publication of Nigel Ashton's biography of the late King Hussein, for which he gained access to Jordanian state archives and the monarch's personal papers. Let us hope that this is a sign of the times (19).

The Northern Ireland case is rather different in that the entire political process, which culminated in the establishment of Northern Ireland's third power-sharing administration in 2007 - this time headed by the DUP and Sinn Féin - took place under the glare of the world's media. But as in Lebanon, accusations abound over the lack of transparency in the political process and the culture of dishonesty in its presentation by politicians, officials and governments to the media. In Northern Ireland, even as early as the tetchy negotiations towards the 1993 Downing Street Declaration, the management of the political process was being carefully choreographed by the British and Irish governments. Disagreements, which had previously taken place in private, were publicly stage managed to minimise embarrassment and limit political fallout. This was, in fact, a sign of the mature evolving pragmatic approach that was developing in Anglo-Irish relations. For example, the 'official' public wrangle that occurred between the two governments over the disclosure of an existing backchannel between British officials, intermediaries and the IRA followed a private bust up that had previously taken place behind closed doors. In essence, political choreography and spin doctoring are central components to the management and presentation of conflict regulation approaches. Especially so, when they take place under intense media scrutiny, involve more than one government and require public legitimisation through referenda. This enables conflict managers to take full credit when they succeed and practice damage limitation when they falter or fail.

Whilst Lebanese politicians generally displayed a keen interest in assisting academic research during the post-civil war period of Syrian domination, many

became very uncomfortable when discussing sensitive political issues. Some certainly appeared more at liberty to examine controversial topics than others or, for a variety of different reasons, were more willing to run the risk of speaking out and facing the potential consequences. Following the al-Qaeda attacks on the US in 2001, many members of the anti-Syrian Christian elite, which had boycotted Lebanon's 1992 legislative elections to effectively become an extra-parliamentary opposition group, were eager to talk about the negotiations that ended the civil war and Syria's subsequent failure to implement the Ta'if Accords. Many of these politicians had been part of the pre-war Christian-Muslim elite that governed Lebanon. Essentially, they had negotiated Ta'if in order to end the war and regain some political influence. However, they soon found themselves shut out of the political process as Syria began to consolidate its control over Lebanon. Having provided support for the US led invasion of Iraq of 1991, Damascus was consequently able to achieve the political dominance in Lebanon that had proved so elusive to all sides during the civil war.

Most of the Sunni and Shi'a leaders who accepted the Ta'if Accords, and some Christians living in Syrian controlled areas, were particularly reluctant to deviate from the 'official' version of the negotiations as presented to the media in 1989. Those who did elaborate on what was publicly known, stressed that they were speaking off the record, highlighting that what they were discussing could potentially put their lives in jeopardy. The physical danger they were under in this respect was self-evident. In general, these interviewees never mentioned the 'S word' - a phrase used in reference to Syria - instead tiptoeing around the issue of Syrian influence without specifically addressing it. In the post-civil war period, most journalists in Beirut exercised rigorous self-censorship when writing or speaking about Lebanese-Syrian relations, Syria's occupation of Lebanon or its dereliction of the Ta'if Accords. Others, such as Gibran Tueini, an outspoken anti-Syrian politician and editor of the daily newspaper, *An-Nahar*, took the opposite approach. He openly criticised Syria's occupation of Lebanon, exercising what he clearly saw as his right to freedom of speech. He did so in a manner that suggested he either had nothing to fear or was prepared to face whatever consequences might arise from articulating such highly disparaging views. On 12 December 2005, shortly after becoming a Greek Orthodox member of parliament, Tueini was assassinated in a car bomb attack - the trademark of political violence in Lebanon. Former Sunni Prime Minister, Rafic Hariri, infamously met the same fate, by the same means, on Valentine's Day of the same year. It was not just politicians who were at risk from political assassination in Lebanon, but

researchers and journalists too. Prominent American University of Beirut Professor, Malcolm Kerr, was murdered by Islamist extremists in 1984, and the controversial anti-Syrian journalist Samir Kassir was blown up in his car in 2005.

The problem of self-censorship also existed in an academic context in Lebanon. In 2001, during the period of Syrian occupation, the UK based Centre for Lebanese Studies held a conference in Beirut on political and social reconciliation. At no point during this event did any of the Lebanese participants raise or address the issue of 'occupation' or the difficulty of reconciling Lebanese divisions under Syrian rule. One young foreign academic asked how the conference could discuss 'reconciliation' in Lebanon without first addressing 'reconciliation' with Syria. This remark was politely ignored, the conference moved on to other issues and the foreign visitor blushed having indiscreetly pointed out the white elephant in the room. In June 2006, following Syria's military withdrawal, the Centre for Lebanese Studies again held an international conference in Beirut, this time focusing on how the Lebanese might break the 'cycle of civil wars' in their country (20). This time, the debate poured over how Lebanon could both resolve its internal divisions and resist the gravity of external forces that once again threatened to drag it into war. There were no restrictions on what people felt they could say or discuss during this conference, which was widely attended by, and covered in, the local media. A year and a half later, in the wake of the 2006 Israel-Hizballah war, I spoke at the American University of Beirut in favour of resisting US pressure to indulge in some form of majoritarian political solution to Lebanon's divisions. To many in the audience, advocating support for Lebanon's old power-sharing formula had become tantamount to supporting Hizballah's demands for a greater slice of the Lebanese political pie. Divisions in divided societies often appear rigid when viewed from the outside, but Lebanon's recent history provides us with many examples of just how rapidly 'things change'.

Political self-censorship in Northern Ireland was also once part and parcel of daily life, but in recent times, topics once considered taboo gradually came to form the staple of conversation in the bars, societies and workplaces that have begun to crosscut the political, social and cultural cleavages that once reinforced its ethno-national divisions. The media played a large role in this by widely facilitating debate on the hot political issues that followed the 1998 Belfast Agreement. Growing up in the internet age, a new generation of people have been instrumental in breaking down traditional barriers to dialogue and engaging in inter-confessional contact. This was not a top down process. Northern Ireland's politicians, officials and security

personnel retained a strong degree of reticence and suspicion towards researchers and the media. This stemmed from past experiences of bad publicity, a culture of secrecy and fear that academic research might paint them in a particularly bad light (21). Building up a level of trust and establishing a reputation for academic integrity was a prerequisite to conducting research in Northern Ireland. Furthermore, if the researcher originates from the divided society in question and is conducting an in-depth interview series concerning its political process, this can pose certain difficulties in creating a balance of interviewees spanning the existing inter- and intra-communal divides. It is very difficult to compensate for such gaps and when evaluating data, academics must be cognisant of this dilemma in their efforts to be neutral and to write from an objective perspective.

For the foreigner conducting research in a divided society, such as Lebanon, a similar problem presents itself in that non-Lebanese academics are often accused of writing historical accounts which present a Christian or Muslim bias. This predicament is somewhat reminiscent of the dilemma the Pakistani in Belfast faces upon disclosing that he is a Muslim, only to be asked whether he is a Protestant or a Catholic Muslim! There is, however, an upside to being non-Lebanese with regard to this dilemma. One finds that all of the different Lebanese factions are keen to be interviewed by foreign academics, so as to ensure that they take their evidence or interpretation of events into account when conducting important research. Another fundamental intellectual problem with researching and writing a comparative analysis of divided societies is that many of the politicians, officials and academics the researcher may wish to interview do not immediately make the connection between contrasting 'apples and pears'. Others clearly display an interest in rejecting the conceptual framework of comparative analysis for different political, intellectual, religious or cultural reasons. For example, following the September 11 attacks on the US Sinn Féin appeared less than enamoured by being compared with non-state actors in the Middle East, such as the Islamist counter elite Hamas in the Palestinian Territories or their Shi'a counterparts in Lebanon.

This has generally become less of a problem as the inter-disciplinary study of comparative politics is increasingly common in leading Western social science institutions. But the cases of Northern Ireland and Lebanon are somewhat surprising in this sense, at least, if viewed from a Western perspective. Most Lebanese politicians and officials immediately grasp the significance of their political divisions and power-sharing institutions to the study and understanding of comparative ethnic

conflict regulation and civil war. To a large extent this is due to a rich history of power-sharing in the Levant, institutionalised under the Ottoman Millet system, through the foreign sponsorship of different ethnic or religious communities (22). Generally speaking, this greatly benefits research that seeks to broadly analyse inter- and intra-elite politics by drawing practical and conceptual lessons from the external linkage politics that marks Lebanon's political system. The Lebanese, comprised of a diversity of 'minority communities' coexisting in the Middle East, ever serving as a cultural crossroads between east and west, have been exposed to the currents of twentieth century international relations in a way that the Northern Irish have not. It is perhaps unsurprising then that many Lebanese view their civil war as a war of the 'others', due to the complex web of state and non-state actors that became embroiled in their conflicts or brought their own conflicts to Lebanon. On one level, this provides the researcher with an insight into the multifaceted relationships that lie at the heart of the political process of such a deeply fragmented society - relationships that largely determine the prospect for a future resumption and stabilisation of power-sharing.

The experience of conducting research in Northern Ireland is dissimilar to Lebanon in that respect. This is largely to do with the fact that the contested six counties of Ulster represent a backwater in strategic and political terms. This 'province' was tightly insulated from the outside world during the course of unionist rule (23). The Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) had reproduced the presentation and ceremony of British politics before Stormont was prorogued, but due to its isolation, Northern Ireland never underwent the same democratic process or development that most Western European societies experienced after the Second World War (24). In contrast to Lebanon, Northern Ireland developed no history or culture of democratic power-sharing. Its geographic situation and political separation from the British central state compounded the idiosyncratic outlook many of its politicians held. This made it difficult for researchers to broaden the focus of the political interview with respect to comparative analysis or international relations. In Northern Ireland, political debate took place within a rather confined space, which was often 'canned heat' rather than constructive dialogue. Lebanese politicians regularly asked questions regarding Northern Ireland's power-sharing arrangements and how they compared with theirs. Tellingly, more often than not, at the end of an interview in Belfast, Northern Irish politicians would simply ask: 'why Lebanon?' When asked what lessons Northern Ireland could learn from Lebanon's tumultuous power-sharing experiences, one former unionist MP simply replied, 'not many.'

Another illuminating paradox that presents itself regarding these two cases is the significance of democracy, democratisation and democratic deficits. Lebanon is situated in a region dominated by authoritarian regimes, and having experienced a varied political history of democratic power-sharing, pluralism remains the cornerstone of its politics. In contrast, whilst Northern Ireland remains part of one of Europe's most enduring and stable democracies, until recently, a legacy of representative democratic government or functional power-sharing institutions were absent from its political culture. The relevance of democracy or democratisation to conflict regulation is something that is particularly difficult to measure given the conflicting foreign policy agendas of the states pursuing their own interests in divided societies. But the debate over the consociational model within this comparative context persists and is worth mentioning here.

## **Conclusion**

In ethnically divided societies the use of consociational government has become a *modus operandi* of western states that seek to intervene in divided societies in the post-Cold War international state system. Terms such as Lebanisation and Balkanisation were once synonymous with ethno-nation divisions, which common wisdom judged unsolvable. The establishment of power-sharing governments in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Iraq and the reestablishment of consociational constructs in Northern Ireland and Lebanon now seem to suggest that there might be life after death for such war torn and deeply divided societies. The application of the consociational model in reconstituting states or reformulating governments should not be judged by the standards of a scientist applying the same governmental model to symmetrical guinea pig states. Rather, consociation, like any social science theory that has been constructed from existing tried and tested models of government, has been debated, developed and applied in an array of different forms in a variety of asymmetrical states and societies.

The irony in contrasting consociation in Belfast and Beirut, and consequently measuring how successful the power-sharing model has been in regulating ethnic conflict in those societies, is that relative political stability has been achieved in Northern Ireland without its power-sharing institutions functioning smoothly. Conversely, the post-Ta'if Lebanese system broke down because Syria, which had imposed stability through a form of non-democratic consociation, was forced to withdraw militarily under international pressure following Hariri's assassination. What

is clear from this paradox is that the power-sharing model in divided societies cannot be judged alone - the merits and demerits of its linkage politics to external states are central. Northern Ireland and Lebanon are not and have never been entirely uncontested sovereign states. External powers have, at different times and with varying degrees of success, sought to exercise an exogenous veto over how the state should be formed or whether it should be formed at all. For example, Heath's Conservative Government successfully ended the unionist dominated Stormont parliament, subsequently ruling out the possibility of any return to majority rule. In contrast, the US sought to end Lebanon's civil war to its advantage in 1983 - sponsoring an agreement between Christian leader Bashir Gemayel and Israel - only to be blocked by Syria, Iran and the USSR.

In Northern Ireland, the question of national identity, for example, remains largely unchanged, while the potential for increasing the sense of 'nested' national identities and developing a syncretistic identity may be realised if power-sharing institutions operationally stabilise in the long-term (25). So could a Northern Irish identity develop in a society that becomes harmonious within a British-Irish archipelago, where borders no longer matter, and the antagonistic residue of past British and Irish state building failures has finally settled? The Belfast Agreement addressed the constitutional issues that lay at the core of Northern Ireland's conflict but (26), critically, it also marked a resolution of the political and constitutional divisions that existed between the British and Irish states, which were clearly evident at the Sunningdale Conference in 1973. The agreement did not resolve national divisions in Northern Ireland but it did provide a stalling mechanism, freezing existing conflicts by postdating the question of a united Ireland through the acceptance on the part of republicans for the need to gain the consent of the unionist community for any future change to Northern Ireland's constitutional position within the UK. After thirty years of conflict with the British Government, having realised the futility of trying to deliver a united Ireland purely through political violence, republicans began to consider how they could achieve a united Ireland and, at the same time, avoid a civil war with a large unionist community that the British Government would not politically abandon. By ending its campaign of violence, the Belfast Agreement provided Sinn Féin with a coherent framework within which to achieve a more united Ireland. Armed conflict had done nothing to persuade the unionist community of the merits of Irish unification. As an externally sponsored inter-governmental framework, the Belfast Agreement allowed both nationalists and unionists to share Northern Ireland without forcing either group to sacrifice the integrity of their respective national identities or

the rival claims to Northern Ireland that define them. So whilst this conflict remains unresolved, there is room for considerable optimism that the endemic political violence that it produced for over three decades is at an end – as the compromise that power-sharing represents between these conflicting aspirations has been widely accepted by almost all the Northern Ireland political parties and the electorate. Despite recent killings by residual Republican fundamentalists the constitutional, institutional and political foundations put in place during the Belfast Agreement's arduous implementation process are likely to be as good as it gets for Northern Ireland.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, Lebanon offers a counter-intuitive example to the internal-external conflict regulation trajectory that transformed Northern Ireland's political process from an intractable zero-sum game to what might arguably be the beginnings of representative pluralist politics. With the failure of pan-Arabism the internal conflict over whether Lebanon could or should exist as a separate entity from Syria was at an end. All the main Lebanese communities had engaged in, worked together and contributed towards making the state work (27). The question dividing the Lebanese two decades after the end of their civil war was no longer one of national identity *per se*. The divide, which came to a head with the Israeli-Hizballah war in the summer of 2006 and remained at the heart of Lebanon's 2009 parliamentary contest, mirrored the wider regional conflict over whether the Middle East would succumb to Iranian or US influence, and it was fundamentally defined by what sort of political state Lebanon should become. This marks a major distinction from Northern Ireland's current power-sharing arrangements, which principally set out to regulate the contradictory national aspirations of the unionist and nationalist communities. The regulation of political conflict in Lebanon cannot be reduced to simply managing Christian separatist and Arab nationalist demands. At least on the surface, the regional and international conflicts provide a veneer for inter- and intra-elite Lebanese rivalries that are more concerned with who will control the state rather than whether the state of Lebanon itself should exist. By laying siege to the Lebanese parliament in opposition to the pro-Western government in residence, Hizballah was representing an opposition movement backed by Iran and Syria. Nevertheless, its Lebanese supporters, wrapped in cedar flags, were also laying claim to a capital that had hitherto been the preserve of wealthy Christian and Sunni elites and their Arab and Western sponsors.

In Northern Ireland, if intergovernmental conflict regulation approaches succeed in applying consociation as a model in the long-term, this will have considerable integrationist side effects within the wider Anglo-Irish relationship. The standard criticism of consociation is that it institutionalises division and creates obstacles to future integration and the practice of normal democratic politics. In many cases, however, the fact that consociation is even being considered indicates that these divisions are extremely deep rooted and its application merely recognises this political reality and seeks to manage them. Ethno-national and religious groups in divided societies often seek political autonomy to safeguard cultural traditions and protect identity - fundamentally, they hold a general desire to be 'left alone'.

The Lebanese, however, were more 'together' than 'apart' during their period of largely peaceful coexistence through consociational government between 1943 and 1975. But it is ironic that political stability came to Northern Ireland prior to the institutionalisation of power-sharing and the full implementation of the Belfast Agreement. Oddly, before the assembly elections of March 2007, the act of full participatory power-sharing itself was the one major outstanding aspect of the Belfast Agreement still to be implemented, with the exception of the devolution of security powers which had also been the outlier issue at Sunningdale. All the other constitutional and symbolic issues at the heart of the conflict had in some way been addressed. This is a measure of the success and strength of this Anglo-Irish approach to conflict regulation in Northern Ireland and it should be recognised and applauded. If we view the process as a slow bicycle race, with the institutionalisation of power-sharing as the endgame, the fact that different parties to the conflict joined the race at different points explains many of the political teething problems Northern Ireland experienced in the first implementation phase of the Belfast Agreement (1998-2005). During this period the British government never lost sight of its goal. When it was politically expedient British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, abandoned David Trimble's UUP. He switched track, promoting a DUP/Sinn Féin led coalition and completed the outstanding security aspects of the Belfast Agreement with Sinn Féin when the process repeatedly stalled (28). The DUP only officially joined the race after May 2005, when it finally defeated the UUP in its intra-unionist struggle over which party would inherit the peace. In 2008, the adage that the UUP and the SDLP did all the heavy lifting in the political process still rang true.

In Lebanon, it is an almost futile exercise to try and measure how successful the Ta'if Accords have been in regulating political violence when the state actor, which is

most commonly blamed for the major acts of political violence that have held back its political rehabilitation, was the country charged with its implementation. The fact that Lebanon's first post-agreement president, René Moawad, remained in office for only seventeen days before being assassinated by a massive car bomb as he returned from its independence day celebrations, neatly illustrates this point. That the Lebanese may wish to avert further civil war, having collectively paid a high price for the last one, remains immaterial in the absence of a regional framework for peace and external actors who hold an interest in peacefully managing its multifarious political divisions.

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## Notes

1. See M. Kerr, A Culture of Power-Sharing, in Rupert Taylor (Ed.) *Consociational Theory: McGarry and O'Leary and the Northern Ireland Conflict*, (New York: Routledge, 2009), pp. 206-220.
2. See T. Hanf & N. Salam, (Eds.) *Lebanon in Limbo: Postwar Society and State in an Uncertain Regional Environment* (Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, 2003).
3. In the course of conducting research into the political processes that ended Lebanon's civil war and established power-sharing in Northern Ireland, I undertook in-depth elite interview sets of seventy five subjects in each case study.
4. For the most up to date academic debate on consociation in Northern Ireland see R. Taylor (ed.), *Consociational Theory, McGarry and O'Leary and the Northern Ireland Conflict*, (New York: Routledge, 2009).
5. See A. Lijphart, *Democracy in Plural Societies* (Yale University Press, 1977).
6. See M. Kerr, *Imposing Power-Sharing: Conflict and Coexistence in Northern Ireland and Lebanon* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press 2006) Chapters 2-4.
7. M. Kerr, 2006, Chapter 2.
8. J. McGarry and B. O'Leary, *The Politics of Antagonism: Understanding Northern Ireland* (London: Athlone Press, 1996); J. McGarry & B. O'Leary, *Consociational Engagements, The*

*Labour Government and Northern Ireland, 1974–9*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); P. Bew and H. Patterson, *The British State and the Ulster Crisis: From Wilson to Thatcher*, (London: Verso Press, 1985).

9. P. Bew & H. Patterson, *The British State and the Ulster Crisis: From Wilson to Thatcher* (London: Verso Press, 1985).

10. See *The Sunningdale Communiqué* (London: HMSO, 1973) and *The Belfast Agreement* (London: HMSO, 1998).

11. J. McGarry and B. O’Leary (2006) “Consociational theory, Northern Ireland’s conflict, and its agreement. Part 1: What consociationalists can learn from Northern Ireland,” *Government and Opposition*, 41 (1) pp. 48–54.

12. F. Khazen, *The Communal Pact of National Identities: The Making and Politics of the 1943 National Pact* (Oxford: Centre for Lebanese Studies 1991); M. Kerr, 2006, Chapter 5.

13. For detailed analysis of the 2006 Israeli-Hizballah war see The Sixth War: Israel’s Invasion of Lebanon, *The MIT Electronic Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 6, Summer 2006; M. Kerr in R. Millar (Ed.) *Ireland and the Middle East: Trade, Society and Peace, Approaches to Power-Sharing in Northern Ireland and Lebanon*, (Dublin: Irish Academic Press 2007) pp. 138-150.

14. J. Anderson, ‘From ethno-national border conflicts to border-crossing resolutions? The Irish experience to date’, Conference Nov. 2005, on ‘Dayton – 10 years later: Conflict Resolution and Co-operation’, Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), Sarajevo. See also, Partition, consociation, border-crossing: some lessons from the national conflict in Ireland/Northern Ireland, *Nations and Nationalism*, 14, 1, 2008, pp. 85-104.

15. See D. McKittrick, S. Kelters, B. Feeney and C. Thornton, *Lost Lives, The stories of the men, women and children who died as a result of the Northern Ireland troubles*, (Edinburgh: Mainstream Publishing, 2007).

16. T. Hanf, *Coexistence in Wartime Lebanon: The Decline of a State and the Rise of a Nation* (London: IB Tauris, 1993) pp. 339 and 605.

17. See M. Kerr, ‘A positive aspect to the tragedy of Lebanon’ – The convergence of US, Syrian and Israeli interests at the outset of Lebanon’s civil war, *Israel Affairs*, vol. 15, no. 4, October 2009.

18. See J. Maila, *The Document of National Understanding: A Commentary* (Oxford: Centre for Lebanese Studies, 1992)
19. N. Ashton, *King Hussein of Jordan: A Political Life*, (London: Yale University Press, 2008).
20. Y. Choueiri, (ed.), *Breaking the Cycle of Civil Wars in Lebanon*, (London: Centre for Lebanese Studies, 2007).
21. P. Arthur, *Special Relationships: Britain, Ireland and the Northern Ireland Problem*, (Belfast: Blackstaff, 2000) p. IX and Chapter 2.
22. J. Spagnolo, Constitutional Change in Mount Lebanon: 1861-1864 *Middle Eastern Studies* 7(1), 1971, pp 25-48; J. Spagnolo, *France and Ottoman Lebanon: 1861-1914* (London: Ithaca Press, 1977).
23. A. Guelke, *Northern Ireland: The International Perspective* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1988) p. 195.
24. P. Arthur, 2000, p. 21.
25. J. McGarry and B. O'Leary, Consociational Theory and Peace Agreements in Pluri-National Places: Northern Ireland and Other Cases in G. Ben-Porat, *The Failure of the Middle East Peace Process? A Comparative Analysis of Peace Implementation in Israel/Palestine, Northern Ireland and South Africa*, (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).
26. O'Duffy B, British and Irish conflict regulation from Sunningdale to Belfast Part I, *Nations and Nationalism* 5(4) 1999, pp. 523-42; & British and Irish Conflict Regulation from Sunningdale to Belfast, Part II: Playing for a Draw 1985-1999' *Nations and Nationalism* 6(3) 2000, pp. 399-435; O'Leary, 'The Nature of the British-Irish Agreement, *New Left Review* 233, 1999, pp. 66-96; Kerr, 2006, Chapter 4.
27. Lecture given by Dr. Joseph Maila at St-Joseph's University, Beirut, 18 April 2002.
28. M. Kerr, 'Internationalising the Arms Issue: The Politics of Decommissioning in Northern Ireland and Lebanon', in Aaron Edwards and Stephen Bloomer (Eds.), *Transforming the Peace Process in Northern Ireland: From Terrorism to Democratic Politics*, (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2008), pp. 212-28.

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