

the big idea



A Lebanese soldier stands in front of a building ravaged by the 1975-1990 civil war, alongside a flag for the Shiite Amal Movement. Patrick Baz / AFP

Final confession?

Following appeals to end Lebanon's sectarian system of political representation, Elias Muhanna asks if even bolder strategies are needed to secure the nation's unity

Last month, Lebanon's Speaker of Parliament, Nabih Berri, called for the creation of a committee. Across the land of the cedars, eyebrows rose and pulses quickened.

For this was to be no ordinary committee. Its task, Berri explained, would be to explore the notion of abolishing Lebanon's system of political confessionalism, in which government posts are divided among the country's 18 officially recognised religious communities, according to a decades-old formula. Calling the current system a source of corruption and instability, Berri – who heads the Shiite political party Amal – insisted that abolishing it was a “national duty” mandated by the Lebanese Constitution.

Berri's rather modest proposal immediately provoked a display of unctuous outrage from Lebanon's Christian politicians. Under the existing framework, seats in parliament are divided equally between Christians and Muslims, despite the fact that the Christian population of Lebanon has fallen well below 50 per cent over the past half-century. Replacing confessionalism with a more democratic system would almost certainly erode the number of Christian elected officials, which is why even Berri's Christian allies wasted no time in quietly distancing themselves from the idea. Meanwhile, his opponents were outspoken in their rejection of the proposal, many pointing out the irony of a man they consider a corrupt, dyed-in-the-wool confessional leader and former warlord portraying himself as a born-again democrat. Even Lebanon's active civil society, for whom deconfessionalism is a perennial cause célèbre, sniffed condescendingly at the initiative, leaving it to die a quiet death in a handful of newspaper editorials.

Moves to eliminate political confessionalism in Lebanon have a long history of failure, dating back to the earliest days of the republic. Leftist political parties and secularists advocated for the abolition of the system in the 1950s and 1960s, and the Taif Agreement (which ended the country's 15-year civil war) called explicitly for the establishment of a non-confessional bicameral legislature, a demand that has gone unheeded for two decades. In 2006, a Lebanese civil-society group launched a media campaign comprised of satirical newspaper advertisements and billboards that purported to offer jobs and services to members of specific sects: parking spots for Christians, doctors who catered only to Sunnis, a modelling agency searching for beautiful Shiite women. If the goal was to provoke debate about the infiltration of sectarianism into every aspect

of Lebanese society, the campaign was a great success: in many neighbourhoods, billboards were defaced by angry residents who mistook feigned bigotry for the real deal.

But while many find the commingling of politics and religion to be odious, most Lebanese seem to regard the prospect of surrendering the imagined security provided by these arrangements far worse than whatever putative benefits a more democratic and non-confessional government might produce. As such, the situation persists, almost universally maligned and yet more palatable than the alternatives.

Part of the reason that the debate about deconfessional reform is so fraught with anxiety lies in the way the issue has traditionally been framed – as a matter of “elimination” or “abolition” (ilghaa'). This gives the impression that confessionalism is something as straightforward as a law that can be struck down in a single parliamentary session, or a government programme that can be shuttered. It implies, in other words, that confessionalism can indeed be abolished from the top down, with a few strokes of a politician's pen.

For ardent secularists who believe confessionalism to be the root of all of Lebanon's woes, eliminating the sectarian quotas in parliament would seem to strike immediately at

the heart of the problem, cutting the Gordian knot of divisiveness, paralysis, and instability, and ushering in a freer and fairer system.

The argument in defense of maintaining the confessional system has typically taken the form of the maxim, recently reiterated by the Maronite Patriarch Nasrallah Boutros Sfeir, that confessionalism must be eliminated from Lebanese hearts before it can be eliminated from Lebanese laws. Confessionalism, in other words, is not merely a system of political representation, but rather an elemental feature of Lebanese society. To try to impose a deconfessionalist programme, by this logic, would be a cure worse than the disease, removing the strictures that keep sectarian tensions in check with no appreciable benefit.

Both critics and defenders of the status quo seem to agree that confessionalism is what makes Lebanon, for better or worse, what it is. What seems to be absent from the debate is the recognition that many of Lebanon's particularities have little to do with the question of whether or not its prime minister is a Sunni or a Shiite, or how its parliament is divided between Christians and Muslims. These are not trivial matters, but it seems fair to say that many of the factors that contribute to the anaemia and instability of the Lebanese state – widespread corruption, powerful patronage networks, the susceptibility of local political actors to foreign influence – will remain even after confessional quotas are dropped in government.

This is not an argument for maintaining the current system. Lebanon's confessional model, with its widespread inequalities of suffrage and vulnerability to sectarian agitation, is deeply problematic. Many activists, however, tend to regard deconfessionalism as a panacea, imagining that the reform of political representation will cleanse the body politic of sectarianism altogether. As necessary as deconfessional reform may be, it is essential to be clear-eyed about the scope of its practical consequences.

Seen in this light, Lebanon loses its particularity: the question is no longer about how to dismantle a very peculiar and idiosyncratic consociational system that was elaborated in response to Lebanon's unique religious make-up. Rather, the challenge is about how one goes about building a viable, democratic, secular state that is more inclusive than any intrastate grouping, be it ethnic, tribal or religious.

No political system can be reformed (let alone abolished) unless there is something to take its place, and in all the heated discussion over deconfessionalism there

is a marked lack of detail about precisely what it would involve. Would the creation of a senate serve as an adequate safeguard of minority rights, or could this be accomplished through other means? Is deconfessionalism simply a code word for secularisation, and if so, how thoroughgoing should it be? The most basic questions, it seems, have yet to be addressed in a systematic fashion by reform advocates, with the result that even something as innocuous as a government committee can be derailed by an onslaught of fear-mongering rhetoric. As a recent survey showed, while 58 per cent of Lebanese favour abolishing confessionalism, nearly one quarter do not understand what this phrase even means; among the remaining three-quarters, definitions vary widely.

Is confessionalism merely a system of political representation, or – as the Maronite Patriarch and other Christian leaders suggest – a phenomenon that extends well beyond the halls of parliament? Even the most cursory scan of Lebanese social and economic landscapes reveals that the claims of the “hearts-first” advocates are undeniable: religious and political identities develop symbiotically in a variety of spheres, from educational institutions and youth groups to patronage networks and personal-status law. However, the strategy offered as a solution to this complex picture – reforming hearts before laws – is surely a recipe for stasis.

Indeed, no change is possible without some degree of centralised, top-down planning (or, as it is sometimes called, leadership). In this respect, Berri's proposal to establish an exploratory initiative represents a rare opportunity to begin the process. Civil-society activists and liberals may hold their noses and wonder just how much can be achieved when confessional leaders are spearheading deconfessional reform – but this is a problem that even mature democracies face, since no existing system can be reformed without the participation of its leaders.

On April 25, advocates of deconfessionalism are planning a “Laique Pride” march in Beirut, which has already garnered thousands of followers on Facebook. It has the potential to be a striking event, sending a message to the political class that deconfessionalism has an active and motivated constituency. However, unless this movement can express a concrete vision and a clear list of demands, no one will really know what they are marching for.

Elias Muhanna, a regular contributor to *The Review*, writes the *Lebanese affairs* blog *Qifa Nabki*.

the tangled web

UFO reports to be destroyed by MoD

The Ministry of Defence (MoD) will destroy all future UFO reports it receives, so it does not have to make them public, a previously secret memo reveals.

Britain's official UFO investigation unit and hotline were closed down at the start of December.

Since then reports of strange sights in the skies sent to the MoD have been kept for 30 days before being thrown out, the newly released policy document shows.

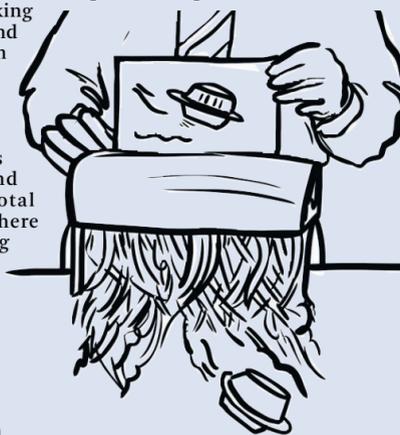
This stance was adopted so defence officials would not have to publish the information in response to freedom of information requests or pass it to the National Archives.

The memo, dated November 11, 2009, sets out the MoD's reasons for shutting its UFO unit and ceasing to invite the public to send in details of sightings.

It notes that the number of reports the department received soared last year, taking up extra resources and diverting staff from “more valuable” defence-related activities.

The MoD recorded 634 UFO sightings in 2009, the second highest annual total after 1978, when there were 750, according to UFO expert Dr David Clarke.

This compares with an average of about 150 reports a year over the past decade.



The Daily Telegraph
www.telegraph.co.uk

'Alien invasion' was on Churchill's radar

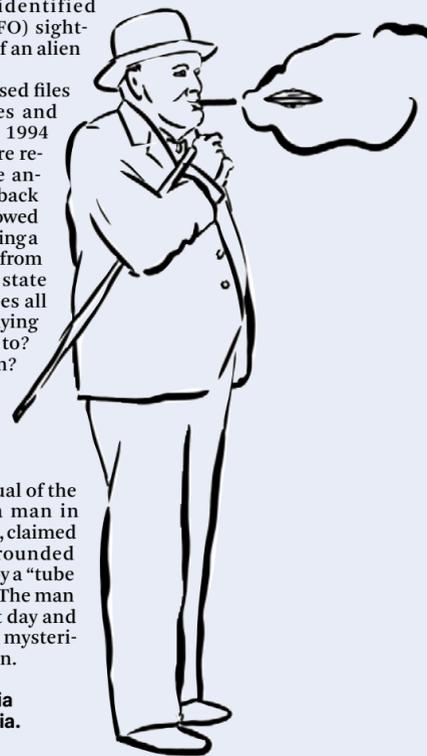
Winston Churchill, Britain's prime minister during the Second World War, also acted over “alien invasion”, declassified documents have revealed.

According to the documents, Churchill ordered senior aides to investigate unidentified flying object (UFO) sightings amid fears of an alien invasion.

The newly released files span 6,000 pages and cover the period 1994 to 2000. They were released alongside another file dating back to 1952 which showed Churchill requesting a briefing on UFOs from his secretary of state for air. “What does all this stuff about flying saucers amount to? What can it mean? What is the truth? Let me have a report at your convenience,” he wrote.

The most unusual of the files tells how a man in Ebbw Vale, Wales, claimed his car was surrounded for five minutes by a “tube of light” in 1997. The man was sick the next day and also developed a mysterious skin condition.

The Times of India
www.timesofindia.
indiatimes.com



Pilot sees fiery UFOs in sky over Rugby

A pilot has described a “bewildering” close encounter with a pair of low-flying UFOs in Warwickshire.

The two glowing petal-shaped craft silently skimmed along at about 1,500ft – the height of a modern skyscraper – until they disappeared behind clouds.

The qualified pilot, based at Coventry airport, watched the spectacle unfold from a garden in Rugby.

“I was looking at the stars when a circular object came into view from behind a cloud,” said the man, who asked to remain anonymous. The object was very clearly visible and was neither a traditional aircraft nor a balloon.

“It was circular in shape but had a structure which resembled flower petals extending outwards from the centre and the petals where very strongly illuminated and appeared to be glowing as if they were on fire.

“Then overlaid at the centre of the craft was a similar array of petals contained within the radius of the wider array.

“These too were very bright and similarly appeared to be on fire, with a shimmering orange glow. It was a quiet and still evening but there was absolutely no sound.

“Having watched this, totally bewildered, for about 40 seconds, a second identical craft came into view on exactly the same track, heading and altitude as the first, with a separation of a mile.”

The sighting happened on August 31, but has only just been reported.

Experts believe many UFO sightings can be explained by Chinese lanterns strung together.

Duncan Gibbons
Coventry Telegraph
www.coventry
telegraph.net

Illustrations by Sarah Lazarovic for The National

