
***Fearing the Intrusion:
Illegal but Legitimate Ethno-religious Dynamics in Lebanon***

Marcello Mollica
(University of Messina)
mmollica@unime.it

Colonel Charles Henry Churchill, British consul in Ottoman Syria, reports that in 1850 a group of American Christian (Protestant) missionaries and their families living in Tripoli (a Sunni Muslim city, in northern Lebanon) decided to spend a few months in the Christian Maronite town of Ehden (today, a famous touristic mountain location), northwest of the Cedar Forest. Once in the village, they entered the houses they had rented. But that same night, suddenly, the village bells began to ring and armed Ehden inhabitants gathered around the houses of the missionaries. Maronite priests led the protest with crosses in their hands. The roofs were climbed, the doors and windows broken and screams rang through the streets: ‘We do not want men of the Bible’, people cried, and, ‘There is no place here for heretics’. The missionaries had to flee in the middle of the night. However, although the outrage could not go unpunished, it was difficult to persuade the Maronites of the town to act because in such matters they were under the jurisdiction of the Ottoman Sultan, Abdülmecid I. This was so because the ecclesiastical hierarchy had always played a decisive role in transmitting the Maronite identity sense, including a community feeling with reference to the homogeneity of both territory (especially on Mount Lebanon) and religion, which in the case of Ehden discriminated within Christianity (Churchill 1985: 56-59).

The Ehden story was what came to my mind when I first read Italo Pardo and Giuliana B. Prato’s paper on ‘Erosions of Legitimacy and Urban Futures: Ethnographic Research Matters’ on which their Introduction to this Special Issue is based (Pardo and Prato 2018); especially when they treat the *vexata quaestio*, ‘What are the culturally specific practices by which people make the categories of the legitimate and illegitimate shift across the domains of the moral, the economic, the legal and the civic?’. However, the above should also be read in light of Pardo’s Introduction to his *Morals of Legitimacy* (2000), where he articulates the concept that, issues of ‘obedience’ and ‘compliance’ aside, the use of power cannot be justified only by relations of mere domination.

In contemporary Lebanon, the (illegal) use of power by Hezbollah (Shi’a Muslims), which is a political legal entity but also a paramilitary illegal entity, has never been seriously challenged by the other two (legal) entities that manage power in Lebanon; namely, the Lebanese Army, acting as legitimate force in Lebanon as a whole, and the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (Unifil), acting as a peacekeeping force in the South of the country at the Israeli border. Indeed, over the last decades, Hezbollah’s relationships with both entities have been of coexistence, not of conflict or serious tension. However, a number of contemporary events in Lebanon — including the dramatic spill over of the ongoing Iraqi and Syrian conflicts and the connected huge influx of refugees clustering into ethno-religious homogeneous areas — cannot be disjointed from the well-established, long-standing history

of sectarianism and violence (Makdisi 2000, Mollica 2016), both without and within Lebanon, as shown by the case of Ehden. This has strongly marked the historical memory of every religious denomination in Lebanon, as well as that of the nearly half a million Palestinian refugees living in twelve camps all around the country.

In my ten-year long fieldwork, conducted between 2006 and 2016 mostly in the South Lebanese city of Tyre, I have often looked at conflicting loyalties and the subsequent legitimate illegality proper of a pluri-ethnic and multi-religious society. Here, moralities may be in conflict with each other, while overlapping with specific loyalties that may lie outside of the nation state, in which case they are mostly religiously-driven. Thus, when these loyalties clash the clash is about the very essence of the state.

However, in a consociational model like the Lebanese ‘confessional’ system, this kind of conflict is institutionally mitigated by a (multi-religious) share of power (Kerr 2005). I submit that it is precisely in the representation of the tension between a democratic system and a consociational one that the ethnographer’s contribution must lie, since he must academically contextualize the borders of this often-overlooked tension. This is a main concern in the way he constructs his detachment from what is happening on the ground and in his narrative, which is proportional to his involvement in the events. It is precisely here that Colonel Churchill’s narrative intersects my ethnography.

In contemporary Lebanon, from the national electoral body down to municipal-level representatives, members are elected in order to defend specific ethno-religious interests and the electorate itself acts according to ethno-religious interests (Mollica and Dingley 2015). These interests, however, are mediated by the presence of an ethno-religiously defined *zaim*; these are political leaders who belong to an ethno-religious group and whose political legitimacy as well as morality may change according to each ethno-religious group.

Here, it is worth mentioning another point developed by Pardo on the kind of immorality identifiable in the government. Pardo mentions, on the one hand, the ‘immorality of dishonesty’ (2000: 5) and, on the other, the immorality ‘of neglect of duty and of the failure to punish this’ (ibid.). When contrasting this conceptual framework with my South Lebanese ethnography, the issue of dishonesty comes paradoxically to the fore with reference to the legal legitimate authority, which is represented as inherently corrupted by the non-legal legitimate authority (Mollica 2014).

Ethical concerns are not univocal, they are, instead, part of a communal frame which is articulated in different ways, making these concerns not just competing but irreconcilable. This is a common occurrence (even an institutionalized one) in consociational models, which often leave it to each ethno-religious community to self-regulate communities-based matters. The state has no role to play in these matters. So, what is morally appropriate or legitimated is relegated to what is moral or legitimate according to each ethno-religious group.

The dominant Hezbollah rhetoric would portray the Lebanese State as incapable of managing resources, as the post-2006 War reconstruction proved (Mollica 2014). This is quite visible in the urban context of Tyre, where religious separation penetrates each realm of human life starting with the economic dimension.

Pardo and Prato (2010) identify a difficult coexistence between different cultures, referring to ways of exclusion and inclusion that implicitly inhibit participation and integration. In Lebanon this difficulty became even more complex as sections of the Lebanese population felt closer to co-ethno-religious population dwelling outside Lebanon than to co-citizens living in Lebanon. In recent years this dynamic has gained further input from the rapid radicalization of the Syrian conflict along religious lines (Fawaz 2016). In Lebanon, this has brought about an increase in distrust towards co-national Lebanese belonging to other ethno-religious groups.

Hezbollah (informal) forces and activities in the city of Tyre were not just well known; they were tacitly overlapping (formal) forces and activities of the legal and legitimate (Lebanese state) authority. Members' citizenship was fully submerged by individuals' religious belonging and affiliation. Moreover, the illegitimate force is territorially and militarily so strong that it is inconceivable for the State (the Lebanese Army and the Lebanese Police Forces) to contrast it, let alone clash with it.

My point is that the (religiously defined) target audience might consider those actions necessary for the very stability of the (religiously defined) community. Given the need to maintain cohesion among members of the community for security reasons, there is no room left for ethical concerns or for respect for the official state structure. Here, it is precisely what are officially deemed to be 'illegal' actions that are needed in reality to guarantee the protection of the (religious) community. This happens because the legal 'legitimate' authority is regarded as incapable of guaranteeing security through 'legal' means, which is what happened in Ehden in 1850.

Power, as Pardo and Prato argue, '*must be seen to be legitimate*' (2010: 2). In my case study on Tyre, power is indeed legitimate, as no one would challenge what Hezbollah men are doing. They carry out blatant patrol and checks, for instance, on people walking on the most important local roads, in the process literally closing these roads to all traffic; and they do so with no need to display any weaponry. The repetition of these events has made them more than just legitimated within the local community and beyond; it has made them embedded in customary rules that in Tyre are now as strong as state rules.

In this context, belonging must be conceptualized with reference to specific (religiously-defined) groups, acting in (ethno-religiously defined) areas in order to pursue (ethno-religiously defined) interests. Nevertheless, what is in question here is the definition and applicability of 'citizenship', and whether the inherent sense of belonging specific to the status of citizen is to be associated with the nation-state, meaning the consociational multi-ethnic entity called Lebanon, which is, in turn, made up of a number of homogeneous ethno-religious, territorially-based entities. In dealing with this issue I would rely on the framework articulated by Heater (1990: 163), which suggests that the maintenance of the *status* of citizen may well be associated with small geographic units; in other words, local communities.

The legitimacy that Hezbollah had gained within and beyond its target (religious) population was manifest in the substantial, tacit acceptance of what were otherwise illicit practices. This ongoing social process based on communal (religious) cohesion has reached a

level where, according to my informants, the local population approaches Hezbollah for a number of services for which the Lebanese legitimate authority is technically responsible. The local population often approaches not only Hezbollah affiliated-groups working in the social and economic realms but also Hezbollah units that work on the suppression of illegal activities, including activities that should be prosecuted by the Lebanese police and security forces, such as criminality, drugs and prostitution. This goes on regardless of Hezbollah's claims that they do not deal with these issues. Clearly, some sections of the Lebanese religious communities trust more the reliability of Hezbollah than that of the legal structures of the Lebanese state. It is at this local level that the communally, religiously-based construction of defence may be more manifest. This may work through a local leader who liaises with a religious, and often a political-religious national authority that operates as a legitimate ethno-religious militia.

These dynamics seem particularly significant when we consider the issue of accountability for the potential illegal activities carried out by illegal organizations; for instance, the aforementioned check points operated by Hezbollah. Such is the identification with 'illegal' organizations that are regarded as being an integral part of the wider (religious) community that the issue of 'punishing' their members — with whom the religious community empathizes — never arises. Instead, should the legal 'legitimate' authority (the Lebanese state) interfere with an activity that is represented by the 'illegal' legitimate organization (Hezbollah) as necessary for security reasons, it could be accused of interfering with a legitimate activity; a legitimacy that, as I have mentioned, prescinds that granted by the official authority.

As for the story told by the British consul Churchill, the American (Protestant) missionaries were driven out of that Christian (Maronite) village because for those local (Maronite) Christians 'the [Maronite] Patriarch was their Sultan'. This was the very essence of the Maronite religion, where every authority was absorbed by that of the Parish priest. In Ehden, the community (defined as such in religious terms) was both a religious guide and an extension of the political leadership. It was therefore the Maronite priests who had to lead the protest when the Maronite community of Ehden felt threatened by American Protestant missionaries.

For both Shi'a Hezbollah (Muslim) and Maronite (Christians) the dominant rhetoric is community-driven and the potential alien components are seen as elements that jeopardize the religiously defined solidarity of the community. The main consequence is that alternative (community-legitimated) enforcers of the law are needed, for the state enforcers seem (or are represented as) incapable of guaranteeing the security of a local (religiously-defined) community that does not trust the State legitimate forces.

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