



Secularism in a Sectarian Political System: Christian and Muslim Support for Political Secularism in Lebanon

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Abstract: This paper explores the relationship between religious identity, religiosity, and attitudes toward state-religion relations, with a focus on support for secularism among Muslims and Christians in Lebanon - a country where both groups share substantial demographic and political power. It challenges the view that religious beliefs inherently conflict with secularism by emphasizing how political factors drive members of different denominations within both religious communities to endorse a secular state. We conducted a novel nationwide survey of approximately 1,200 individuals to measure support for political secularism. We found broad support for secularism among both Muslim and Christian denominations, regardless of their level of religiosity. Our findings challenge the notion that religious identity and religiosity, in themselves, necessarily hinder political secularization. We also find that almost all Lebanese across all denominations are dissatisfied with the existing sectarian political system. Our findings suggest that the convergence of personal and group interests among Muslim and Christian denominations within the context of the poor performance of sectarian governance are key factors shaping their support for a secular state in Lebanon.

Öz: Bu makale, dini kimlik, dindarlık ve devlet-din ilişkilerine yönelik tutumlar arasındaki ilişkiyi incelemekte; özellikle de Müslümanlar ve Hristiyanlar arasında sekülerliğe verilen desteğe odaklanmaktadır. Çalışma, her iki grubun da önemli ölçüde demografik ve siyasi güce sahip olduğu bir ülke olan Lübnan'ı ele almaktadır. Araştırma, dini inançların doğası gereği sekülerlikle çeliştiği yönündeki görüşe meydan okumakta ve bunun yerine, her iki dini topluluk içindeki farklı mezheplerin üyelerini seküler bir devleti desteklemeye yönelten temel etkenlerin siyasi faktörler olduğunu vurgulamaktadır. Siyasi sekülerliğe verilen desteği ölçmek amacıyla yaklaşık 1.200 kişiyi kapsayan, ülke genelinde uygulanmış özgün bir anket gerçekleştirdik. Bulgularımız, dindarlık düzeylerinden bağımsız olarak hem Müslüman hem de Hristiyan mezhepler arasında sekülerliğe yönelik geniş bir destek bulunduğunu göstermektedir. Bu sonuç, dini kimliğin ve dindarlığın tek başına siyasi sekülerleşmenin önünde zorunlu bir engel oluşturduğu yönündeki anlayışa meydan okumaktadır. Ayrıca, tüm mezheplerden Lübnanlıların neredeyse tamamının mevcut mezhep temelli siyasi sistemden memnun olmadığını tespit ettik. Bulgularımız, mezhepçi yönetim anlayışının zayıf performansı bağlamında Müslüman ve Hristiyan mezheplerin kişisel ve grup çıkarlarının örtüşmesinin, Lübnan'da seküler bir devlete verilen desteği şekillendiren temel faktörler olduğunu göstermektedir.

Keywords: Lebanon, Secularism, Sectarianism, Muslim, Christian

Acknowledgements: We thank all three anonymous reviewers for their comments and suggestions. This research was supported by TÜBİTAK 2221 through its support for Ekrem Karakoç as a visiting scholar at Istanbul University.

Writing a data availability statement: The data for this study are available upon request.

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DOI: 10.12658/M0810
insan & toplum, 2026.
insanvetoplum.org

Received: 29.12.2025
Revised: 14.04.2026
Accepted: 02.06.2026
Online First: 30.10.2026

Introduction

Do Christians and Muslims demonstrate distinctive attitudes toward the relationship between state and religion? This long-debated question has provoked much discourse among scholars, with some contending that theological-historical distinctions between the two religions explain differences in political and economic outcomes between Christian and Muslim-majority countries. Most notably, scholars such as Lewis (2002) and Huntington (1996) attribute the lack of democracy in Muslim-majority countries to an essentialist perspective on the relationship between modernity and Islam in general, and the state and religion, in particular. In particular, these two scholars, among many, argue that major factors such as the central role of Sharia law in many Muslim-majority countries, coupled with the Prophet's historic role as a political leader, collectively serve as underlying factors for the absence of democracy in the Middle East. Other scholars such as Stepan (2000), Stepan and Robertson (2004), Esposito and Burgat (2003) and Hashemi (2009) find their perspective historically and theologically problematic and underscore the multi-vocality of state-religion relations in Muslim-majority contexts. These scholars point to Quranic references such as Shura, an assembly of elite Muslims designated as a decision-making body, the political history of former Muslim Empires and political diversity within Muslim-majority states and argue that Islam is not promoting a religious authoritarian state.

The ongoing debates, whether focused on historical comparisons or theological issues, are important but do not directly address our central question: How do ordinary Muslims and Christians view the relationship between religion and the state? Like earlier studies, we assert that the attitudes of ordinary people toward these relationships are influenced by a broad spectrum of factors, which extend beyond mere religious doctrines or religious legacy of former Muslim Empires in the region (e.g., Tessler 2010; Norris and Inglehart 2004). Many citizens may lack or differently interpret an understanding of the core principles of their religions and their implications on their attitudes and behavior. In fact, cultural norms, personal experiences, education, and media exposure often have as much, if not more, influence on individual perspectives on state-religion relations as macro factors like regime characteristics or economic conditions. Moreover, large-N studies that analyze the percentage of Muslim or Christian populations across the globe to address our questions often yield misleading results, due to ecological fallacy, misinterpretation due to a fundamental mismatch between the unit of analysis and our posed question (Inglehart and Welzel 2003). We also assert that public opinion on this topic is significantly understudied. For example, although there has been a large number of studies on the relationship between Islam and democracy at the individual level, research on public attitudes toward political secularism remains notably scarce, with

some exceptions (Brezna, Lykes, Kelley and Evans 2011; Buckley 2016; Karakoç and Baskan 2012). As Tessler (2010) stated, this gap is especially significant and surprising as debates over state-religion relations are often central to discussions on the challenges or potential for democracy in these societies.

To address these gaps, we design a novel public opinion survey to test whether Muslims and Christians, in general, and religious Muslims and Christians, in particular, hold differing attitudes toward the relationship between state and religion. We have chosen Lebanon as our case study, a country characterized by its religious diversity and a historical and political legacy shared by its citizens.¹ Lebanon enables us to control a number of contextual factors, ranging from regime type, a past sectarian civil war, political system, state capacity, regional factors and many others. Lebanon's unique multi-confessional system also provides a quasi-laboratory setting to investigate our research question. If significant differences in attitudes toward political secularism between Muslims and Christians exist, we could attribute this divergence largely to religious or theological factors. Conversely, if no significant differences are observed across various denominations in Islam and Christianity within the Lebanese context, it would suggest that attitudes toward state-religion relations are not shaped by differences in religious doctrines. Instead, social, economic, and political factors play a more significant role, undermining theological influences.²

Using our novel nationwide representative public opinion survey, which included 1,200 individuals in Lebanon in October 2016,³ we offer important findings: a similarity in attitudes toward state-religion relationships between Muslims and Christians in Lebanon. This consistency persists even when breaking down into subgroups, such as Sunni and Shia Muslims, Druzes or Maronites, Catholics and Orthodox denominations. We found high levels of support for a secular state across all these religious affiliations, including religious or nonreligious members of sectarian groups, rendering religious identity a less important predictor for one's stance on secularization.

The contribution of this paper is manifold: Firstly, it critically addresses the existing literature on political secularization, which is regarded as a driving force behind the development of democracy in the West. Our findings reveal that Muslims

1 We conducted the survey well before the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2020 Beirut explosion, and the more recent Israeli invasion of South Lebanon and its bombing campaign against Hezbollah. It remains unclear how long this latest conflict will persist and when one can conduct another nationwide representative survey in Lebanon.

2 However, it is important to clarify that we do not suggest these factors and religious beliefs are independent. As elaborated in the subsequent sections within the article, we argue that individuals affiliated with sectarian groups take into account the socio-economic and political status of their own groups while shaping their political attitudes.

3 The survey was conducted by a local company, Statistics Lebanon.

and Christians exhibit remarkably high and comparable levels of support for a secular state in Lebanon, indicating that religious doctrine may play a lesser role in shaping these attitudes than social and political context, as suggested by some scholars (e.g., Tessler 2010, 252). Second, this paper, by focusing on Lebanon- a unique political entity where major Christian and Islamic denominations coexist - challenges the popular narrative that theological factors inherently lead Muslims to oppose secular politics, setting them apart from Christians. Third, the paper underscores that these attitudes are not merely a reflection of individual preferences but are also deeply rooted in the protection of group identity and interests. Our work's emphasis lies on ensuring political coexistence in a fragile political structure and maintaining power symmetry across sectarian groups, highlighting how these dynamics shape attitudes toward state-religion relations and the preference for a secular state.

This paper is structured as follows: Initially, we review the major theoretical debates on secularism and secularization. We then shift our attention to secularization in Muslim-majority countries. Subsequently, we specifically examine the case of Lebanon related to our debate. Lastly, we present the results of our nation-wide representative survey conducted in Lebanon, followed by a discussion on the implications of our findings on existing debate on state-religion relations and public opinion in the MENA and Lebanon.

Theoretical Discussion on Secularism and Secularization

We first discuss two major terms that are key to discussions about the interplay between religion, state and society: secularism and secularization. At its core, secularism can be described as the delineation or even emancipation of the political sphere from the domain of religious institutions, such as the Roman Catholicism (Keddie, 2003).⁴ As a doctrine, it mandates that the state maintain an equidistant stance toward all religions and ethical systems. Consequently, religious principles cannot serve as a basis for the formulation of public policies, including those on national education and healthcare (Asad 2003).⁵ However, many such as Asad (2003), Razavi and Jenichen (2010) and Mahmood (2015) argue that this strict separation between religion and state or politics have never been realistic and presented a more complex picture. For example, Asad (2003) contends that secularism is not merely a neutral stage where religion and politics are bifurcated. Instead, as exemplified by France's *laïcité* policies, the state actively defines and regulates the parameters

4 See Keddie (2003) for how secular and then secularization has evolved as a concept and practice.

5 For an interesting argument for the relationship between religiosity and secularization, see Asad (2003).

of religious expression. While ostensibly excluding religion from public spaces, this form of secularism involves the proactive management of religious symbols and practices to maintain public neutrality. In contrast to French *laïcité*, also known as assertive secularism, passive secularism in Anglophone models, as conceptualized by Kuru (2009), allows political and religious elites to form coalitions to pursue specific objectives, which may not always be mutually aligned.

Like Assad, Taylor (2007) observes that secularism does not stem from a singular historical experience but has evolved within a myriad of cultural contexts. Taylor also notes the transformative shifts in how individuals interpret and experience both belief and unbelief, particularly as organized religion wanes as a primary source of meaning. He argues that this dynamic leads to a diversified range of belief systems within the public sphere. This perspective is reinforced by Göle (2015), who suggests that the religious and the secular are not mutually exclusive but coexist in contemporary society. She emphasizes that the focus should not solely be on the absence of religion in public spaces, but on the interaction of symbolic and cultural distinctions between religious and non-religious spheres.

The multifaceted character of secularism becomes evident when exploring its different typologies. Casanova (1994) offers a tripartite model comprising: the differentiation of secular spheres from religious institutions and norms; the decline in religious beliefs and practices; and the privatization and marginalization of religion in the public sphere. Razavi and Jenichen (2010) critically examine Casanova's theory on the 'de-privatization' of modern religion, challenging the idea that religion has ever been solely a private concern. They argue that religion has always significantly influenced state policies and exerted its influence on specific domains—like family, marriage, and personal law. Taylor (2007), in contrast, proposes a triadic conceptualization of secularism that includes: the retreat of religion from the public sphere and state policies (Secularity 1); the decline in religious beliefs and practices (Secularity 2); and the evolving understanding of religion that accommodates a multiplicity of belief systems (Secularity 3).

Building on these discussions above, we define secularization as the process by which religion loses its influence over these three distinct but interrelated spheres: the private, public, and political.⁶ The majority of extant studies have primarily focused on testing the validity of secularization theory by examining declines in religious

6 Scholars pointing to the process of secularization extending to other spheres. For example, Keddie points the process of replacing religious values with non-religious values in morality, education and culture. See this discussion, Keddie (2003), p. 15-16

beliefs and practices, at both individual and national levels. These studies identify three primary catalysts for the secularizing effect of modernization: industrialization, urbanization, and the expansion of state activities (e.g., Berger 1967; Dobbelaere 1987). Industrialization and urbanization erode traditional feudal bonds, diminishing the role of religion as a social adhesive, as a result of decline in religious beliefs and practices. For instance, Norris and Inglehart (2004) suggest a complex relationship, where economic development is indeed correlated with lessened religious fervor, but the decline is not universal and varies significantly by region and cultural context.

While these studies offer invaluable insights into the decline of religious beliefs and practices, most often exclude the importance of political secularization in secularization studies (Karakoç and Baskan 2012). We define political secularization as both the declining but contesting scope of religious authority in *the political sphere* and the process through which religion loses its influence over citizens' attitudes toward various facets of public life, governance, and political institutions. This includes the separation of church and state, which confines religious institutions to the private sphere, thus diminishing their direct impact on governmental policies and public affairs. In a politically secular society, theoretically but rarely in practice, as discussed above, the state not only adopts a neutral or equidistant position towards all religions and ethical belief systems, but citizens and their representatives themselves also relinquish any claims to shape the public sphere according to their belief.

The political secularization process, which can be described as the power practices involved in the political act of drawing boundaries between religion and secular political spheres, emerged with the aim of putting an end to the conflicts between the Catholic Church and secular power in general, and among different Christian sects in particular, during the power shift in Europe. However, Asad (2003) and Taylor (2007) argue that this process has not emerged in the rest of the world for the same reasons, nor has it flourished in the same patterns as it did in Europe. Secularization, which is mainly used to explain the relation between modernity and religion in European societies, has become an indispensable concept in discussions of the recent failed democratic uprisings in the Muslim world (Özcan 2018). The role of religion is a central issue in the politics of most Middle Eastern countries, making the secular-religious divide a highly significant factor in both domestic and regional politics (e.g., Blaydes and Linzer 2012; Özen 2020).

Farha (2012), who critiques secularism theories that originate from European experiences and are subsequently applied to non-Western contexts, such as Lebanon, challenges the modernization-dominant view that the removal of spiritual or religious elements from social, economic, and political arenas is a requisite for

achieving political secularism. Farha's definition of secularism focuses on the critical importance of a political regime's neutrality, emphasizing the need to avoid bias and discrimination based on religious affiliation as much as possible, even if this is an impossible mission. This perspective highlights the principle that secularism involves the absence of favoritism toward any particular confession or sect rather than the de-spiritualization of society. This argument was also supported earlier by late prominent MENA scholar, Iliya Harik (2003,6), who highlights the imperative for a state to maintain impartiality toward diverse communal groups. Harik argues that secularism is defined as the capacity to operate within the public sphere, making decisions and taking actions based on the context and issues at hand, without being impeded by personal identity.

State-Religion Relations Debate in Muslim-Majority Countries

The civilizations perspective, symbolized by Huntington (1996), Lewis (2002) and others, argues that the fusion of religion and politics in Islam dates back to Prophet Muhammad, who served not just as a spiritual leader but also as a political figure. While this view enjoys support, Lapidus (1975) argues that it overlooks the fact that the convergence of religious and political leadership did not persist in Muslim empires after the Mongol invasions in the 10th century and the rise of the Seljuks in the 12th century. In terms of 'the relationship between political and religious life, Islamic society has evolved in un-Islamic ways', each political and religious spheres developed 'independent values, leaders and institutions.' From then on, the Caliphs were weak, if not powerless, the political ruler, Sultans, subordinated the Caliphate and Caliph to his will, as later as seen in the Ottoman Empire, confining the religious authority's power to non-political arenas such as personal status laws, commercial conflicts or teachings and administrators (Zemmin 2021). Even the relationship between political authority and religious authority has currently shown significant variation in the region. The complexities of this interaction can also be observed across diverse contexts, ranging from Egypt to Turkey, Iran, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, and Saudi Arabia, reflecting a different combination of state and religion relations, ranging from theocracy to the multiple combinations of religion-state relations within a country over time (Akkuş, Karakoç and Shalaby 2025).

The second school, somewhat challenging the civilizations perspective led by Lewis and Huntington, modernist school argues that Muslim-majority countries are not immune to political transformation as they deepen their economic modernization process (e.g. Norris and Inglehart 2004; Tamimi and Esposito 2000; Eickelman and Piscatori 2004). Factors such as high literacy rates and urbanization are believed

to contribute to cognitive changes in society. While acknowledging that these transformations may not yet have spurred widespread secularization akin to what was first experienced in the West, modernist scholars such as Norris and Inglehart (2004) posit that accelerated economic and social development could eventually lead to similar secular shifts in Muslim-majority countries. Although this perspective has faced criticism for its linear historical approach, it deserves some credit for challenging essentialist views by highlighting the potential for change and evolution in state-religion dynamics across different cultural and historical contexts.

The third school, rational-choice theorists, challenging the theological approach of the civilizational school and the lack of agency of the second, argues that the state-religion relationship is instrumental, deliberately designed by political elites to perpetuate their hegemony over other elites, including religious ones (e.g., Gill 2008; Stark and Bainbridge 1987). This perspective maintains that the existing institutions related to state-religion are not dictated solely by theological debate. Instead, they are very much shaped by the strategic calculations of political elites and their interactions with religious institutions. This school underlines the pragmatic and strategic choices that both religious and political actors make. In this respect, it transcends civilizational or modernization explanations, focusing instead on the specific contexts and interests that guide behavior in the religious and political spheres.

These schools extensively discuss the theoretical underpinnings of secularization, mostly in terms of religious symbols, beliefs and effect in public sphere, yet there remains a gap in understanding how these theories manifest in people's perception toward religion-state relations. Specifically, the civilizations perspective posits a variance in support for secular politics among Muslims (low support) and Christians (high support), attributed to differences in religious doctrines. Contrarily, modernist theories suggest that such differences are more a product of modernization factors at the individual level, be it income, education, or urban-rural divide, rather than religious beliefs. Meanwhile, rational-choice theorists advocate for examining the interplay between state policies, elite actions, and their cascading effects on public opinion.⁷

To determine whether there is a significant difference in the public attitudes of Muslims and Christians towards political secularization, explicitly suggested by theories of civilization and implicitly by modernist perspectives, we focus on Lebanon for the reasons discussed in the introduction.

7 We do not have survey questions, especially related to how elite discourses affect public opinion, to test hypotheses associated with the rational choice approach in this study.

State-Religion Relations in Lebanon

Lebanon provides us with a quasi-experimental laboratory setting to empirically examine to what extent Christians or Muslims differ from one another in terms of supporting political secularism. In Lebanon, Muslims and Christians each constitute around fifty percent of the population based on the last census in 1932, providing an imperfect balanced and diverse religious landscape for this study.⁸ In addition, all sectarian groups experience the same regime legacies. First were under the Ottoman Empire followed by French colonial rule until its independence in 1943. Second, various forms in consociationalism since its independence that give proportional political representation to religious denominations has provided imperfect political balance across religious groups.

Lebanon is often associated with sectarianism, though this is frequently misunderstood as being rooted in fixed identities. This paper defines sectarianism as a constructed political identity, arguing against the notion that sectarianism or sectarian identity is innate to individuals or to Lebanese society as a whole. Makdisi (2000) highlights that the Ottoman Empire's Tanzimat Reforms (1839-1876) and subsequent French colonial policies were instrumental in crafting and entrenching sectarian identity out of Christian and Islamic religious denominations as a political identity among Lebanese citizens. While sectarian identities were transformed into a political identity, historical evidence suggests that in Lebanon, before modernization and urbanization transformed the country around 1960s, sectarian identities, especially for Shi'as, were often less important than loyalty to political families and ideological beliefs (Hanf 2003). The political saliency of these identities was not fixed; they fluctuated, influenced by the civil war and events that followed. For example, Zu'ama, traditional political elites and landlords, remain influential forces in Lebanon, having regained their prominence which had diminished during the 1990s and on. Hanf's longitudinal cross-sectional study (2007) on Lebanese public opinion tracing changes from 1987 to 2006 reveals that approximately 36 percent of respondents in 2006 believe that Zu'ama and landlords wield the greatest influence in Lebanon. According to Hanf (2007) even though religious leaders gained more prominence and influence during the civil war and through to 2002, they remained secondary to the Zu'ama and landlords.

8 The 1932 census in Lebanon, despite the controversies over its accuracy, showed that the Muslim and Christian populations were roughly equal. However, emigration and the 1975 civil war have likely shifted this demographic balance. Some contend that Christians now constitute one third of Lebanese population. See <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-lebanon-population-idUSL132108820061113/>

A closer look at the era surrounding the formation of the Lebanese state by colonial France underscores how both domestic and international factors have significantly shaped sectarian identity and sectarianism. Lebanon's path to independence was characterized by a unique cross-confessional cooperation, as evidenced by the National Pact between Maronite and Sunni leaders in 1943. This pact, which played a pivotal role in the country's foundation, involved Maronites giving up French protection in return for Muslims forgoing their calls for Arab unification (Hagopian 1989). In the ensuing post-World War II period, Lebanon managed to maintain a semblance of isolation from regional trends, thereby preserving a space where secularism, though progressively losing its influence, could still exist (Farha 2019).

However, the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990) dramatically intensified sectarian divisions, a situation exacerbated by the collapse of state institutions and public order. The 1989 Taif Accord, formulated in response to this crisis, aimed at dismantling political sectarianism through various reforms. These included merit-based appointments in civil services, educational reforms to promote national unity, and the removal of sectarian labels from identity documents.⁹ Despite these promised reforms, the Taif Accord resulted in further consolidation of confessional identities in political sphere, further aggravated by Syrian political dominance, the influx of Gulf capital, and ongoing international conflicts like the Palestinian-Israeli conflict (Ghosn and Khoury 2011; Farha 2019). The secular project's inability to dismantle the sectarian system, especially evident during the civil war, marked a turning point in the political behavior of various groups within the country, leading to a resurgence in sectarian identity allegiance (Hazran 2013). During this turbulent period, religious figures, especially from the Druze, Sunni, and Maronite communities, filled the void left by absent political leaders, assuming significant roles in providing essential services to their communities (Henley 2016). The post-civil war era in Lebanon was further complicated by massive emigration and the decline of the middle class. The growing income inequality and the state's failure to provide basic services and job opportunities led to diminished trust in state institutions and a consequent strengthening of familial and religious bonds (Farha 2019, 222). In Lebanon, the political elites have utilized consociationalism and the existence of diverse religious communities to monopolize state institutions and resources, thereby reinforcing sectarian sentiments (Salloukh 2023). As Andersen (2022) put it, the political elite and the state in Lebanon is competent in maintaining power but show a lack of competence in developing economy and providing public services to its citizens.

9 For Taif Accords, see <https://peacemaker.un.org/lebanon-taifaccords89>

While there were domestic, regional, and international tensions and conflicts that have often reinforced sectarian divisions in Lebanon, it's essential to recognize factors that have subtly eroded these sectarian identities, such as the rise in education leading to the development of personal and professional networks beyond traditional church and mosque affiliations. These networks facilitated the diffusion of a state that accommodates various religious groups, though their impact was limited as they were predominantly confined to academia and the business community (Farha 2019, 114). For these people, secular people are seen as more cosmopolitan, open-minded, educated, and modern than other Lebanese, with 'secular' referring to a post-sectarian social identity that can be recognized as an alternative to traditional sectarian identities like Sunni, Maronite, or Druze (Deeb 2020, 227).

The Role of Religious Leaders in Lebanese Society: Religious leaders are responsible for religious affairs, controlling the hierarchies of clerics in running places of worship, schools and personal status courts. Religious leaders do not incite religious hatred, they are invested in coexisting with one another to preserve the political system that confers their power. As Henley (2017)'s analysis of Maronite Patriarch and Mufti of Sunnis' public statements between 1975-1990 show that these two religious leaders pursue tolerance and orient their discourse toward coexistence in peace as 'the champions of a pluralistic religious nationalism.' Religious figures are generally diffusing the sectarian tensions and playing a role of de-radicalization. Because of the abovementioned roles, Henley (2016, 4) argues that religious leaders have to manage an inherent ambiguity in their roles since they must navigate a gray zone between their religious roles and their broader duties as communal representatives.

Religious leaders in Lebanon should not be underestimated as mere passive figures; they actively seek to exert influence over the political process in their communities. The Christian religious authorities in Lebanon, particularly the Maronite Patriarchate at the forefront work hard to shape political positions of their community. The preceding Patriarch, Nasrallah Sfeir maintained tense relations with Michel Aoun of the Free Patriotic Movement. Sfeir also endeavored to forge a coalition between Samir Geagea of the Lebanese Forces and Michel Aoun, yet these efforts ultimately proved unfruitful. The rivalry with Michel Aoun significantly influenced Patriarch Sfeir's eventual resignation. Following his departure, Bechara Boutros Al-Rahi succeeded to the patriarchal position, perceived as a more neutral figure amidst these political tensions (Goenaga and Mateos 2012). This demonstrates the (strong or passive) changing role of the Patriarch in reinforcing sectarian identities through its religious authority and its political ambitions. Overall, the political sway of familial dynasties in Lebanon greatly exceeds the influence the Church can wield over political elites (Henley 2017).

Within the Sunni community in Lebanon, religious affiliations span a wide spectrum, from Salafi to Sufi movements, with each movement led by its own set of leaders. This wide-ranging diversity results in a fragmentation that weakens the collective influence of Sunni religious leaders, making it challenging for them to unite and mobilize their followers towards a common political aim. Furthermore, the control exerted by powerful, Beirut-based political families over the appointment of the Sunni Mufti position has led to a sense of disenfranchisement among many Sunnis, particularly those in Tripoli, Sidon, and the Beqaa Valley. Feeling marginalized, these communities have increasingly gravitated towards various radical Salafi organizations as a means of expressing their religious identity and grievances (Lefèvre 2014).

In contrast to the Sunni case, Hassan Nasrallah's charismatic leadership and organizational acumen have successfully unified various Shia factions around a shared political goal.¹⁰ Beside the differences of Shia understanding from that of Sunni's in terms of following their religious leaders, Nasrallah's effectiveness in rallying the Shia community under a common cause demonstrates a stark difference from the fragmented state of Sunni religious leadership (Norton 2018). Hezbollah, encompassing social, political, and military facets, has established itself as a unified entity adept at safeguarding Lebanon's borders against adversaries such as ISIS, occasionally surpassing the Lebanese military in effectiveness. Consequently, Hezbollah was seen not only as a key player within the Shia community but also as a legitimate defender of Lebanese borders against threats like ISIS by some within the Christian and Sunni populations (Karakoç, Özcan and Özcan 2022).

Domestic and regional political developments have significantly altered the relations between sectarian groups across Islamic denominations as well. In examining the sectarian dynamics, it is crucial to acknowledge the growing intra-Muslim divide in Lebanon as well. The assassination of Rafiq Hariri in 2005, the conflicts between Hezbollah and the Future Movement in May 2008, subsequent parliamentary elections, and the impact of the Syrian civil war have all contributed to the deepening of Sunni-Shi'a divisions. All these events have solidified Sunni-Shi'a cleavages as a central element of sectarian tension within Lebanese politics and society, as noted by scholars such as Deeb (2020) and Hanf (2003), Cammett (2014), and Hoffman and Bagdanov (2021). These events underscore the dynamic nature of sectarian relations, illustrating that while existing differences may not be insurmountable, sectarian tensions in Lebanon are particularly sensitive to shifts triggered by

10 The assassination of Nasrallah in late September 2024 will surely have an impact on the Shia leadership in Lebanon. However, the short- and long-term consequences for the Shia community remain uncertain.

immediate domestic and regional developments. Given the precarious conditions of the state institutions in the country, the primary concern of official religious leaders in Lebanon have long been prevention of collapse of the state and its constitutional institutions (Henley 2016, 2017).

Lebanese People's Perceptions toward Religion-State Relations

We conducted face-to-face interviews in Lebanon from October 2nd to October 26th, 2015, with a sample size of 1,200 adults aged 18 and above. The sample was geographically diverse, encompassing all major Lebanese regions: Beirut (10%), Mount Lebanon (40%), North Lebanon (20%), South Lebanon (16%), and the Beqaa Valley (12%). From these regions, a total of 1,361 (geographic) sampling units were selected. Utilizing the Probability Proportional to Size (PPS) sampling method, we identified 153 primary sampling units, or clusters. Each of these clusters comprised 100-150 households. Within each cluster, we selected 8-10 households. The selection of individual respondents within these households was made using a Kish table to ensure randomness. Each respondent was approached a maximum of three times. If a respondent was unavailable or unwilling to participate, or if we couldn't reach them after three attempts, another household was randomly selected as a replacement. According to our survey, the population breakdown is as follows: Sunnis 27%, Shias 26%, Maronites 27%, Eastern Orthodox 5%, Catholics 4%, Druze 8%, and Others 2%.¹¹

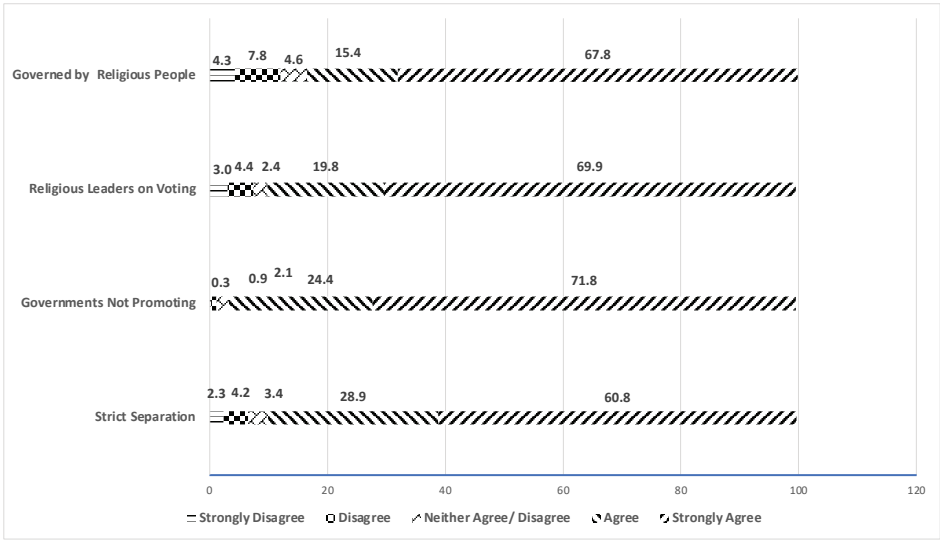
To operationalize the concept of political secularism, we have devised two sets of questions. The first set aims to gauge the extent of public support for the separation of state and religious institutions, as well as attitudes towards the government's promotion of any religious doctrines. The second set of questions focuses on understanding public perception regarding the current political system's reflection of sectarian diversity and its ability to ensure equality before the law. These latter questions also provide context for how individuals form their preferences and interpret the meaning of political secularization in relation to their personal beliefs and experiences.

We asked, 'Please tell me to what extent do you agree with the statements I am going to read.' (1) 'There should be a strict separation of the state from religious institution', (2) 'Governments should not promote any religious doctrine over others.' (3) 'Religious authorities and leaders should not influence how people vote in elections' (4) 'It is better for the country to be governed by people with strong religious beliefs.'

11 The survey conducted for this study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Binghamton University-SUNY.

The respondents answered them in a 5-point scale where 1 corresponds to ‘I strongly disagree’ and 5 corresponds to ‘I strongly agree’.

Figure 1: Attitudes toward State-Religion Relations in Lebanon



Note: The questions are ordered by column: (1) ‘There should be a strict separation of the state from religious institution’; (2) ‘Governments should not promote any religious doctrine over others’; (3) ‘Religious authorities and leaders should not influence how people vote in elections’ and (4) ‘It is better for the country not to be governed by people with strong religious beliefs (recoded)’.

Figure 1 presents responses from all sectarian groups. The data strongly indicates a consensus favoring the separation of state and religious institutions, with at least 90 percent of the Lebanese population. Approximately 96 percent express overwhelming support for the statement that governments should not promote any religious doctrines. Furthermore, the survey reveals a significant resistance to the influence of religious authorities or leaders on electoral choices. A 90 percent of respondents support the principle that religious figures should not exert any influence on citizens’ electoral decisions. About 83 percent disagree with the idea of highly religious individuals holding higher positions in government. This finding stands out when considering the research of Tessler (2002) and Buckley (2016), which indicated that despite a general reluctance to have religious leaders directly involved in politics, there exists a broader acceptance for the participation of individuals holding religious values in the political sphere. Yet, within the Lebanese context, there is worry that individuals with pronounced religious affiliations could favor the interests of their own sectarian groups.

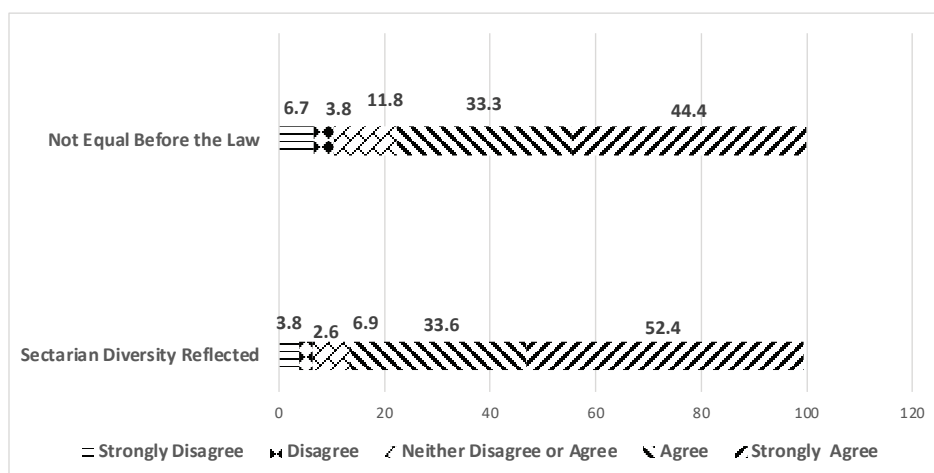
The strong support for a politically secular system may be influenced by public perceptions of the current sectarian systems. To investigate this, we presented respondents with two other statements for evaluation: (1) 'The Lebanese political system reflects religious/sectarian diversity,' and (2) 'People of different religions and beliefs are treated equally before the law.' Figure 2 shows that a significant majority, over 86 percent, believe that the Lebanese political system adequately represents sectarian diversity, while only about 6 percent disagree with this view. This indicates that the majority of Lebanese society perceives political system reflecting sectarian diversity. However, the response to the second statement revealed a contrasting sentiment, highlighting widespread dissatisfaction with the system. Approximately 78 percent of the population feel that their sectarian groups are not treated fairly before the law. This suggests that while people recognize the representation of sectarian diversity in the Lebanese political system, they simultaneously feel discriminated against under the law. Hanf (2003) highlights a prevalent desire among the Lebanese for a political system that ensures equitable representation of all confessional groups under the auspices of a neutral state. He finds that this inclination leans towards a consociational democracy, which is favored for its inclusive approach to governance, allowing all groups representation, as opposed to a majoritarian democracy where the losing parties are relegated to opposition status. He details the results of a survey conducted with his colleagues among the economically active segment of society, revealing that approximately 80 percent of respondents supported the idea of a secular politics in 2002. Our findings indicate that this support had significantly increased by 2016.

Further analysis of the data broken down by sectarian affiliation uncovers more detailed views. While all religious groups predominantly advocate for a strict separation between state and religious institutions, Table 1 shows that there are some slight variations in the degree of support. The Druze community shows the highest level of support at 97 percent, followed closely by Catholics and Orthodox, both at 94 percent. On the other end of the spectrum, the Shia community exhibits the lowest level of support, though still very high, at 86 percent. Regarding the statement that governments should not promote any religious doctrine, a consensus is evident across all groups, with a near-unanimity. The Shia community, while still largely in agreement, shows a slightly lower level, 90 percent. It is important to highlight that within the Shia responses, only 3 percent explicitly oppose this view, with the remaining 7 percent falling into the 'neither agree nor disagree' category.

As for the third and fourth questions, we see similar trend. For example, 91 percent of Sunni, 90 percent of Maronite, 90 percent of Orthodox, 94 percent of Catholic,

and 96 percent of Druze respondents oppose the influence of religious leaders on the electoral process. In contrast, a relatively lower percentage (84 percent) of Shia agree with this sentiment. It is noteworthy that among all groups, Shia and Orthodox respondents demonstrate the highest support (11 percent) for religious influence on voting. The majority across various groups, including 98 percent of Catholics, 90 percent of Druzes, 86 percent of Sunnis, and 85 percent of Maronites, support secular governance. However, the Shia and Orthodox communities show relatively higher support for religiously inclined governance, at 16 and 17 percent, respectively.

Figure 2: Attitudes toward Lebanese Political System



Note: The questions are ordered by column: (1) ‘The Lebanese political system reflects religious/sectarian diversity,’ and (2) ‘People of different religions and beliefs are not treated equally before the law (recoded).’

Table 1

Attitudes toward State-Religion Relations by Sectarian Identity

	Strict Separation State and Religious Institutions		Governments-Not Promote Any Religious Doctrines		Religious Leaders- Not influencing Voting		Governed by People With Strong Beliefs	
	Disagree	Agree	Disagree	Agree	Disagree	Agree	Disagree	Agree
Sunni	7	91	0	100	5	91	86	11
Shi'a	8	86	3	90	11	84	71	16
Maronite	8	89	1	99	9	90	85	13
Orthodox	3	94	0	100	11	89	83	17
Catholic	2	94	0	100	6	94	98	2
Druze	2	97	1	99	3	96	90	9
N:	1196		1199		1994		1198	

While there is a high demand for secular governance in Lebanon, it is crucial to determine whether this demand transcends religious distinctions, encompassing both religious and non-religious individuals across various groups. If religious individuals, both Muslims and Christians demonstrate substantial similar support for secularization, it might indicate that religiosity plays a less pivotal role in shaping political preferences than found in the studies conducted in Muslim-majority or Christian majority countries. To investigate this, at Table 2 and 3 we compared religious and non-religious persons' responses to the four survey questions, and we conducted an analysis of mean differences. This statistical approach is designed to reveal any statistically significant differences between the two groups. We found statistically significant differences in three questions among Shia respondents and one question among religious Sunni individuals, with the latter demonstrating a lesser demand for secular governance. However, for other religious groups, no statistically significant difference exists between religious and non-religious individuals.

Table 2 shows that religious Shia (83 percent) and Sunni (90 percent) individuals were slightly less likely to support this separation compared to their non-religious counterparts (94 percent for Shia and 97 percent for Sunni). The differences in support for the separation between religious and non-religious Shia, and between religious and non-religious Sunni, are statistically significant. This trend contrasts with the Orthodox (90 percent religious vs. 94 percent non-religious) and Catholics (90 percent religious vs. 97 percent non-religious), where non-religious individuals showed more support for separation. Maronite responses were nearly identical (89 percent religious vs. 90 percent non-religious). However, statistically significant differences do not exist between religious and non-religious individuals within these groups.

Table 3 reveals that there is a consensus across both religious and non-religious members of sectarian groups that the government should refrain from endorsing religious doctrines. However, a statistically significant difference was found only among Shia respondents: 89 percent of religious Shia supported the idea of government non-involvement in religious doctrine promotion, compared to 97 percent among non-religious Shias.

Table 2
State-Religion Relations by Religious versus Non-Religious

	N	Separation Between		Mean Diff	Not Promoting Any Religious Doctrine		Mean Diff
		Religious (%)	Non-Religious (%)		Religious (%)	Non-Religious (%)	
Sunni	318	90	97	0.34**	100	100	-0.02
Shia	307	83	94	0.25**	86	97	0.19*
Maronite	329	89	90	-0.05	98	100	0.01
Orthodox	64	94	90	-0.07	100	100	0.1
Catholic	47	97	90	-0.11	100	100	-0.04
Druze	100	95	100	0.06	98	100	0.05

Note: Bold ones are statistically significant at $p < .05$.

Table 3
Religiosity in Government by Religious versus Non-Religious

	N	No to Religious Leaders on Voting		Mean Diff	Not-Governed by Highly Religious People		Mean Diff
		Religious (%)	Non-Religious (%)		Religious (%)	Non-Religious (%)	
Sunni	318	91	95	0.09	85	93	-0.05
Shia	306	82	96	0.3**	70	77	-0.15
Maronite	329	90	90	-0.13	85	90	-0.12
Orthodox	63	96	100	0.25	91	100	-0.27
Catholic	47	90	97	-0.35	97	100	0.04
Druze	100	93	100	0.13	88	93	-0.06

Note: Bold ones is statistically significant at $p < .05$.

Analysis of responses to the two remaining questions shows that even though there are some percentage differences between religious and non-religious members of sectarian groups, the variations are not statistically significant, except in the case of the first question for Shia respondents. For this question, which pertains to whether religious leaders should influence voting decisions, overwhelming support (more than 90 percent) was observed across all religious groups, both religious and non-religious. However, this support was at 82 percent among religious Shia and 96 percent among non-religious Shia individuals.

Regarding the statement on whether individuals with strong religious beliefs should govern the country, non-religious members across denominations are slightly more inclined to oppose the idea of highly religious individuals in governance roles. However, the difference in opinions between religious and non-religious individuals is not statistically significant. Specifically, 85 percent of religious Sunnis and 93 percent of non-religious Sunnis prefer to exclude highly religious people from political authority roles. Among Shia, this is 70 percent for religious and 77 percent for non-religious individuals. For Maronites, the figures are 85 percent (religious) versus 90 percent (non-religious), for Orthodox it's 91 percent (religious) versus 100 percent (non-religious), for Catholics, 97 percent (religious) versus 100 percent (non-religious), and for Druzes, 88 percent (religious) versus 93 percent (non-religious).

Conclusion

The absence of a dominant religious group within Lebanon's weak and decentralized political system uniquely positions Lebanon as an ideal context to explore the dynamics between religious communities and political secularism.¹² This unique case enables us to eliminate the effects of confounding factors associated with country-specific variables often present in large-N studies. It also allows us to compare and contrast our findings with those from studies conducted in Muslim-majority countries. For example, we find results similar to those of Tessler (2010), who in his cross-national analysis identified Lebanon as an exceptional case in the MENA region due to its strong support for political secularism. Our finding also differs from Collins and Owen (2012) who found that religiosity supports less political secularization in Central Asia. In this respect this study contributes to the growing body of literature that questions the once-dominant view that religious identity and religiosity is the primary determinant of attitudes toward the separation of religion and politics. We argue for the importance of considering non-religious factors such as the nature of the regime, shared civil war experiences, the existing political status quo, religious demographics, and the distribution of political power.¹³ In this respect, we agree with Tessler (2010) and Moaddel (2007)'s caution that, to understand Islam's role in governance, scholars must consider the specific political and social contexts where attitudes are formed.

The Lebanon case shows that between Muslims and Christians, there is no substantial difference in their secular orientation towards state-religion relations. This does not imply that religious differences are irrelevant to political preferences; but suggests that the impact of non-religious differences may supersede the theological factors some academic and media highlights. In this respect, our findings corroborate the conclusions of Breznau et al (2011), indicating that when controlling for political system variables such as the rule of law, economic development, and prior regime type, the disparity between Muslims and Christians in their overall support for religious political leaders in politics becomes insignificant. They do, however, differ over the nature of the political system. Conducting a public opinion across Lebanon in 1999-2000, Haddad (2001) finds that preferences for Lebanon's political

12 At least it was the case until Israel invaded the southern part as of October 2, which produced displaced people about one million. Our survey was conducted before the Israel-Hezbollah conflict and the 2021 Beirut explosion that devastated Beirut and Lebanese economy.

13 A close look at the emergence of secular polities, Western European history suggests that the Westphalia Treaty gave birth to secular polities and granted other Christian minorities (e.g. Catholics in Protestant states) right after the religious wars in 16 and 17th century.

regime vary significantly among sectarian groups. Christians (all denominations) favor a federal system, aiming to maintain their political power within the existing framework. In contrast, Muslims, except for Druzes, leveraging their majority status, support a unitary state, possibly holding the belief that it will enhance their power and influence within the system.

The findings add to previous research that shows how the political preferences of religious groups are closely linked to their perceived collective interests (Kalyvas 1996; Hoffman 2021). Members of these groups often shape their opinions based on what they believe will benefit their group's social, economic, and political standing, rather than solely on individual preferences or theological considerations. For example, regime change is evaluated not just in terms of its alignment with religious principles but also in light of its broader implications for the group's collective well-being. Similarly, Belge and Karakoç (2015) argue that religious minorities in Jordan and Egypt tend to support authoritarian regimes while ethnic minorities in Turkey and Morocco are less likely to support an authoritarian regime. In informal agreements with authoritarian regimes, religious minority groups may not possess political power, but they are (not always credibly) assured from economic harm and guaranteed physical security. Our research also shows that Shi'as in Lebanon, as a non-dominant religious group, are more inclined to support a secular system. This contrasts with the findings of Tezcur and Azadarmaki (2008), whose survey demonstrated a correlation between high levels of religiosity among Shi'as in Iran and support for clerical rule.

Hoffman (2021) offers another compelling case with strong evidence from Lebanon and Iraq that individuals, when articulating their political preferences, for instance, favoring democracy or specific institutional choice, simultaneously consider the interests/status of their respective groups. In his analysis of Lebanon and Iraq, he argues that communal practices, like prayer, reinforce the alignment of individual and group interests, politicizing identities and deepening societal polarization. For example, an individual may support democratic transition but fear it could weaken their group's power in an authoritarian system (Kalyvas 1996, Hoffman 2021).

One may be rightly concerned about the implications of the questions that may be sensitive in some countries. As Corstange (2013) shows in Lebanon that sectarian identity significantly influences responses to sensitive political questions. This sensitive context may cause people to express opinions differently in public and private settings. However, the issues we addressed are less divisive and unlikely to be seen as acts of "defection or treason" within the same sect. Unlike the sensitive topic of voting rights in Lebanon, our questions were designed to avoid sectarian

tensions. We deliberately excluded references to specific religious leaders, using more “unobtrusive” wording, which made the topics less contentious (Corstange 2013, 893 and 900).

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