



E-ISSN: 2471-7576

June 2024, Vol: 9, Issue: 6

E-mail: editor@ijhassnet.com

<https://ijhassnet.com/>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33642/ijhass.v9n6p2>



<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Fouad Chehab and the Soft Power post-1958 Crisis in Comparison to the Latest Crisis: Lessons Learned in Facing Violence

Simon A. Kachar, PhD.

Lecturer

Department of Political Studies and Public Administration

Faculty of Arts and Sciences

American University of Beirut

Email: sk158@aub.edu.lb

Lebanon

ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the approaches that former Lebanese President of the Republic Fouad Chehab (1958-1964) followed to face and overcome the crisis and the violence that took place in the summer of 1958 against the constitutional amendment that would have allowed the outgoing President Camille Chamoun (1952-1958) a second term of office. It also explains Chehab's priority in restoring Lebanese unity and stability based on the National Pact of 1943 aiming at ensuring a peaceful, prosperous, and dignified Lebanese existence. It digs into the attempt to secure a better future", and the recovery from the 1958 crisis including the re-establishment of a spirit of harmony, unity, and cooperation among the different Lebanese communities; all from the perspective of the "soft power" Chehab followed to face the 1958 violent and sectarian crisis. It reflects the past to our current days, especially after 2019 including the tragedy of the Beirut seaport explosion on August 4th, 2020. What lessons can be learned from the Chehabist experience in facing one of Lebanon's most violent and sectarian crises? What if the same approach was followed in our recent crisis?

KEYWORDS: Lebanon; Chehabism; Sectarianism; Revolution; National Unity

1. Introduction

The purpose of this study is to evaluate what was done in terms of the crisis faced in 1958 amid the three months civil war that erupted in July 1958 and how General Fouad Chehab¹ back then Army Commander and later on President of the Republic faced it, as well as evaluating how the recent crisis that broke out in 2019 and 2020 (Beirut seaport explosion) was faced. It reflects the past to our current days, especially after 2019 including the tragedy of the Beirut seaport explosion on August 4th, 2020, and what lessons can be learned in retrospect.

Despite its small size, Lebanon played a prominent role in the regional political arena in the 1950s. This involvement in Middle East developments during the decade took place in the context of many issues, domestic as well as international. The existence of Lebanon as an independent state was based on the National Pact, concluded in 1943 between the two main denominational groups "Christians and Muslims" each of which made up roughly half of the population. The Pact stipulated that the president be a Christian, the prime minister a Sunni Muslim, and the speaker of the parliament a Shi'i Muslim. The 1950s were a turbulent period in the Middle East. The unstable domestic political compromise in Lebanon and the following crisis constituted aspects of larger international issues. (Romero, 2012, p. 268).

Among the most important things that Camille Chamoun² wanted the Americans to do in 1958 was to support his bid for another term in the presidential palace over the objections of pro-Nasser Lebanese Muslims (Little, 1996, p. 37).

If we want to go back to the year 1958 modern Lebanese history, and specifically to the 'Lebanese crisis in perspective', Salibi (1958, p. 369) addressed the fact that, on May 8, 1958, Nassib Metni who is a leftist journalist was murdered in Beirut, and the motive of this murder was never discovered, but the opposition accused the government of the crime. The opposition claimed from the very start of the troubles that it was leading a nationwide strike against the corruption of the government and President Camille Chamoun of a variety of 'crimes', adding that the strike would continue until the president resigns (Salibi, 1958, pp. 369-370).

Meanwhile, the Lebanese Army, commanded by General Fouad Chehab was ordered to quell the insurrection, but the General was reluctant, and in response to Government pressure, he agreed to contain the insurrection by purely defensive action without attempting to crush it (Salibi, 1958, p. 370).

According to Salibi (1958, p.380), while the insurrection continued to simmer, the United Nations and the international aspect of the problem looms larger than ever, and he claimed that whether Chehab's election – as a president would provide a temporary solution to the internal problem remains to be seen; but it was certain that, unless definite measures are taken to guarantee the independence and integrity of Lebanon, the Lebanese Republic remain in constant danger of losing its independence and of coming under the dominance of the Arab power.

Salibi (1961, p.32) addressed an important question whether the 1958 events in Lebanon a revolution? He says that those who were rebels against the established regime maintained that their movement was a revolution and insisted

¹ Lebanese Army Commander (1946-1958) and Lebanese President (1958-1964)

² Lebanese President (1952-1958)



E-ISSN: 2471-7576

June 2024, Vol: 9, Issue: 6

E-mail: editor@ijhassnet.com

<https://ijhassnet.com/>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33642/ijhass.v9n6p2>



<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

that it was essentially an internal movement directed against the corruption and tyranny of the regime of President Chamoun.

From a different perspective, (Sorby, 2000, p. 76), mentions that the Lebanese conflict of 1958 had close internal, local, and international dimensions, and it is only by examining these three sources that the Lebanese crisis can be understood. He says (p. 93), that the scene was set for a confrontation between the government and the opposition, and that the balance of power was not in favor of Chamoun, as Chehab refused to commit the army on Chamoun's side, and the neutralization of the army was important in two respects: the first it exposed basic divisions within the Lebanese government and the precarious position of Chamoun himself, and second, a neutral army enabled the opposition with material and political help from the UAR³, to expand and consolidate its presence in large areas of the country. Sorby (2000, p. 94), addresses that despite overwhelming dependence on outside forces, local actors were far from passive or pliant spectators. The polarization of world politics into two competing blocs enabled small states to advance their interests by manipulating their rivalry between Moscow and Washington.

According to Salibi (1966, p. 217), from the start of the crisis, Chehab agreed to contain the Muslims and Druze insurrections, but he was clearly unwilling to put down the insurrections by military force, and when he informally urged to act against the rebels, he apparently explained that his army was composed of Muslims and Druze as well as Christians and that its unity could not be counted on if it was to be committed on a political issue that was largely sectarian. That army, as discussed in "Gen. Fuad Chehab (1973), which by 1958 numbered fewer than 10,000 men, was still sufficient to hold the balance in the country's fragmented political life. Still, General Chehab resisted suggestions that he take over the reins of government, avoided public proclamations, and called himself "the Great Mute," an Arabic equivalent of "Strong Silent Man."

Romero (2012, p. 567) argues that most scholars who have examined the Lebanese 1958 crisis, seem to have concluded that it was caused by a combination of internal and external factors, or more exactly, by interaction among domestic, regional, and international forces. In addition to keeping the army aloof from the civil war, General Chehab contained the spread of hostilities between the government and opposition forces through frequent contact with opposition leaders. The army's neutral position in the Lebanese civil war did not mean, however, that it played no role in the crisis. Under Chehab's command, its primary tasks were to keep the warring parties apart and to be utilized as an instrument of diplomacy. The objective of this position was not to allow any one force to grow sufficiently strong to win a decisive victory in the civil war. Chehab did not hesitate to take what he deemed necessary measures to guarantee the existence of the Lebanese state. (Romero, 2012, p. 578-579).

Johnson (1986, p. 137) mentions that when General Fouad Chehab took office as President of Lebanon in 1958, he had to deal with the immediate repercussions of the civil war, and according to Huse (2014, p. 17), the 1958 civil war lasted three months. Some 2000 Lebanese died in the 1958 civil war. The 15,000 US Marines did not fire a single shot, but US mediation brought about a compromise. Chamoun was succeeded by Fouad Chehab, a candidate acceptable to both Christians and Muslims: He was perceived as moderate, and less pro-Western than his predecessor. Additionally, Chehab was the army commander during the crisis and largely kept the army from participating. Chehab's more Arab-friendly government helped lessen the sectarian animosity. In the end, there was "no vanquished and no victor". The conflict was resolved, but not its causes.

Kachar (2023; p. 77) mentions that days after his election, President Fouad Chehab issued the first presidential statement on August 4, 1958. He called on the Lebanese to calm down. He said in the statement: "...The first thing I ask of myself and what I ask every Lebanese citizen to strive with all our effort and energy to return the country to its national unity, through which Lebanon achieved its independence in 1943, proved its sovereignty, and consolidated its entity, from which his National Charter emerged, a charter that remains with the national policy outlines in the constitution and guaranteeing the glory of Lebanon and the prosperity of its people. Fouad Chehab's first mission was to form the first governments of the new era, and directly implement the plan to remove armed appearances, barricades, and trenches, and extend security and the prestige of authority Renewing and restoring national unity.

And in this same context, Wilson (2017, p. 134) says that in his first address to the nation in August 1958, President-Elect Fouad Chehab vowed that Lebanon would emerge from the dark days of that summer "more confident in itself, more solidly established, and with its position reinforced". His priority, he explained, would be the restoration of unity and stability in line with the 1943 National Pact, to ensure a peaceful, prosperous, and dignified existence for Lebanon. Even in that early speech, he stressed that "science, order, and equality" must prevail across Lebanese society to secure a better future.

Abou Jaoude (2021, p. 810-811), argues that one cannot study Chehab's reforms without situating his ascendance to the presidency in its proper context. By 1958, it had become clear that the Lebanese state was suffering on the institutional and societal level: on the one hand, corruption was rampant, and services were only delivered to certain parts of the country while others remained ignored. Chehab endeavored to undertake both state-building and nation-building. His political mission required achieving a specific fulfillment of the National Pact, the fundamental agreement at the heart of the state.

To Lebanon in 2019, Abou Jaoude (2021, p. 810), addresses the issue that in October 2019, the Lebanese government, faced with a fiscal and budgetary crisis, decided to issue a new tax on calls through the messaging application

³ United Arab Republic



E-ISSN: 2471-7576

June 2024, Vol: 9, Issue: 6

E-mail: editor@ijhassnet.com

<https://ijhassnet.com/>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33642/ijhass.v9n6p2>



<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

'WhatsApp'. A few days later, thousands of Lebanese citizens were in the streets protesting widespread corruption and crying out for political and economic reforms. While the demands of the Lebanese protesters were in no way unified, one could still make out a few general points on which most of them insisted. In the short term, many demanded the return of 'stolen money', the resignation of the government (and for some, that of the president and Members of Parliament), and the formation of a technocratic government.

Khatib (2022, p. 76) writes that the 17 October Revolution in Lebanon cannot be called successful, mainly due to the limited change it was able to impose on the political landscape. It did not have the intensity required to completely change the existing regime. However, those revolutions occurred when the social contract was no longer valid as the mutually beneficial exchange between the ruled and the ruler no longer existed.

Also, according to Khatib (2022, p. 86), When the protest broke up, the commander (in chief) took a clear position in a break with the political system by stressing the right of people to protest peacefully. This put him at odds with many politicians. The army received a lot of criticism from the political elite as it was accused of not being firm enough with the protestors. At the same time, it is being accused by protest groups of suppressing their freedom of expression. The army has prevented protestors from marching to the presidential palace.

Khatib (2022, p. 87) says that the protest died down with the Covid 19, the lockdown that the government enforced, and the difficult economic situation when people were busy getting by every day and had little energy to organize and protest. The situation was revived with the 4th of August blast, though for a short while. Following the blast people protested under the slogan "Hang the gallows". People were mainly busy with relief. Though Beirut was put under emergency, hence under the army control, nevertheless the state of emergency was not properly implemented and control was not properly given to the army. The declaration was more of a stunt to appease people. People were promised with result of the investigation after five days, however, a year after the blast the investigation did not conclude. And also, as per Sivaraman & Varadharajan (2012, p. 3), no official investigation report has been published to date by the Lebanese officials.

(Al-Hajj et al., 2021, p. 938) write that on 4 August 2020, around 2750 tons of ammonium nitrate (AN) stored at the Port of Beirut, Lebanon, exploded causing one of the largest chemical explosions in history and the third most devastating explosion in recent time. Decades of political corruption and sectarian dissection have laid the foundation for a collapsing state that failed to secure safety and provide basic services to its citizens. The Beirut port explosion triggered further ripple effects on the country's fragile social, economic, and health infrastructure.

Haddad (2022, p. 93) mentions that the Beirut Port Explosion took place during many compounding crises in Lebanon, mainly the Syrian crisis that led to the influx of more than 1.5 million Syrian refugees, in addition to an economic crisis that started in 2019 and the COVID-19 outbreak that strained the health system in the state.

According to Haddad & Sakr (2022, p. 1169), In Lebanon, the building of a disaster management plan has been hindered over the years by different obstacles. Historically, disaster risk management was not a priority for the Lebanese government; however, things changed during the disastrous winter of 2002 when the government introduced building codes specific to earthquakes and fires for buildings exceeding three stories.

2. Methods

This study is based on comparative literature of both mentioned periods where relevant works were studied and analyzed to show the difference in crisis facing and management of these two periods. The data was justified by looking at comparative literature. What was studied in the first period – 1958 – were the steps taken in facing the crisis and then the actions implemented to reform and overcome the bad implications of the crisis. Then the second period 2019 onwards – is studied in retrospect, from the same perspective, aiming at showing the difference in dealing with a national crisis to try to reach an answer to a counterfactual question about the lessons that can be learned from the first experience in facing one of Lebanon's most violent and sectarian crises, and what if the same approached was followed in Lebanon's recent crisis.

3. Results

This study shows that Lebanon in 2019 and 2020, in all its governmental arms, was not prepared for any kind of crisis, be it the economic one in the fall of 2019, the health one in the first quarter of 2020, and the big explosion in the summer of 2020. Neither the governmental administrative and judicial bodies nor the armed forces were up to the level of facing such a crisis. In any functional state, the government should have a leadership role in crisis management and needs to be proactive, which is not the case in Lebanon recently.

In retrospect, back in 1958, "the serious division of the Lebanese parties and public between pro-Americans (headed by Chamoun) and pro-Nasser (grouping the majority of Muslim leaders), manifested in armed clashes in the streets creating a volatile situation and jeopardizing the future of the newly independent state and its unity. Like in 1952, during the uprising against President El Khoury, Chehab, still, Commander of the Lebanese Army, refused to allow any military interference or intervention; especially since he knew that the Army ran the inevitable risk of becoming divided. Under his command, the Army simply protected the presidential palace, prevented any of the fighting parties from taking over places of strategic importance, and remained thus united and immune". Chehab the head of the army before assuming presidency played an almost reactive role in absorbing the crisis, keeping the army neutral,



E-ISSN: 2471-7576

June 2024, Vol: 9, Issue: 6

E-mail: editor@ijhassnet.com

<https://ijhassnet.com/>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33642/ijhass.v9n6p2>



<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

but at the same time protecting the Lebanese state; he was on top of the mission that was commissioned to him. Whereas Chehab as a president, acted in full capacity proactively by forming a government that issued by June 1959 (less than a year) a total of 162 legislative decrees, and by appointing the IRFED Mission⁴ to conduct a large survey on all the country's human, natural, economic and social capacities and needs, and to propose plans, projects and solutions for the existing social and economic problems.

"The extensive report presented by IRFED that was submitted in 1961, confirmed Chehab's insight into the fact that underneath the deficiencies of the political system and the confessional conflicts laid serious economic and social problems. The apparent prosperity in the capital Beirut was covering back then alarming under-development and poverty in other regions, such as the Bekaa, the Hermel, the North, and the South, which strongly lacked basic infrastructure (electricity, water, roads). Lebanese citizens from the neglected rural areas were moving towards the suburbs of Beirut in search of a better income, creating thus a 'belt of misery' around the capital. Huge economic and social gaps were noticed in the society and between the regions, especially at the National Income level".

"President Chehab asked the IRFED Mission to pursue its work and propose additional solutions to remedy the diagnosed problems and weaknesses. Chehab devoted the remaining of his mandate to initiate various social and economic development projects nationwide (Beyond Beirut), and to introduce fundamental reforms to the state's administrative institutions".

4. Discussion

A closer examination of Chehab's rise to the presidency, which followed a brief and ferocious civil war, reveals the favorable conditions that made it possible for him to assume the presidency. Chehab was the compromise that all parties were searching for because of his choices made during the events of 1958 and the lack of a viable alternative. He met the demands of the Lebanese opposition and Nasser as well as Nasser's agreement with the USA. Chehab recognized the exceptional opportunity that was presented to him and, having built the Lebanese army understood what was required for stability to be restored. He embarked on the required reforms to equalize the power between the two groups because he believed in the National Pact and the Lebanese state's destiny as a crystallization of Christian-Muslim collaboration.

This was not done at all in 2019, or let's say the exact opposite was done. The national arena was left to the non-governmental organizations in the post-explosion period and the 2019 economic crisis and revolution that followed were not contained at all by any governmental body with a limited exception from the Lebanese army that tried to play a containment and protective role but politics was stronger. The lack of leadership specifically a national leader, who can act as the referee, is the main difference between 2020 and 1958.

There is no direct answer or assumption to the fact that if the same approaches followed in 1958 were followed in 2020, the recent crisis could have been contained, but what is almost sure is that some lessons can be learned from previous experiences, the most important of which is to always look at the nation's common good and public interest.

Lebanon is a pluralistic country. And in pluralistic countries and societies, it is usually the elite intelligentsia that is appointed in key positions to lead the public offices. All of the aforementioned in terms of political reform must be coupled with administrative reform or the building of an effective administration, judicial reform or the building of an effective and honest judiciary, and the establishment of real citizenship, and a cautious foreign policy as it is necessary that Lebanon's foreign policy protects its national unity, and vice-versa.

Only the President of the Republic can provide this dynamism that a rapidly changing country needs and it is precisely this possible dynamism that makes the President adopt planning instead of improvisation in approaching public issues. Political practice is based on an ethical understanding of politics on the one hand, and the idea of the state and its interests' domination on the other hand so that the state can function correctly through the sound path for the judiciary and public administration.

This President of the Republic must have one goal, which is to build an independent state in the complete sense of the word. Hence, President Chehab's address on the occasion of Independence Day in 1960 was very expressive, when he ended it by telling the Lebanese: "On the occasion of independence, said to be taken and not given, I only see myself expressing Lebanon's experiences when I say true independence is not taken, not given. Independence is built."

President Chehab believed that independence is a permanent building effort obtained through every citizen and the daily work of every citizen, wherever he lives in Lebanon. In the same speech, Chehab called on the Lebanese to accede to the state, and he told them directly, "The Lebanese state is now going through a new stage of its life, the stage of basing Lebanese public life on sound and firm foundations of freedom, justice, and science, where every Lebanese is given his right from the state and society, to live a life of dignity, and in which the state and society have the right to expect from every Lebanese his loyalty and the duties that it entails".

Then we will be able to measure the seriousness and possibility of political change in a pluralistic society like Lebanon. At that time, cultural, social, religious, and sectarian pluralism would not be an obstacle to this change.



E-ISSN: 2471-7576

June 2024, Vol: 9, Issue: 6

E-mail: editor@ijhassnet.com

<https://ijhassnet.com/>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33642/ijhass.v9n6p2>



<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

References

- _____. (1973). Gen. Fuad Chehab, Lebanese Leader. *The New York Times*.
- Abou Jaoude, T. (2021). Chehabism revisited: The consequences of reform in Lebanon. *Middle Eastern Studies*, 57(5), 810-832. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00263206.2021.1891891>
- Al-Hajj, S., Mokdad, A. H., & Kazzi, A. (2021). Beirut explosion aftermath: lessons and guidelines. *Emergency Medicine Journal*, 38(12), 938-939. <https://doi.org/10.1136/emered-2020-210880>
- Goldstone, J. A., Grinin, L., & Korotayev, A. (2022). Introduction: Changing yet persistent: revolutions and revolutionary events. In J. A. Goldstone, L. Grinin, & A. Korotayev (Eds.), *Handbook of revolutions in the 21st century: The new waves of revolutions, and the causes and effects of disruptive political change* (pp. 1–33). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-86468-2_1
- Haddad, T. (2022). *International and local actors in disaster response: Responding to the Beirut explosion*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Haddad, T., & Sakr, T. (2023). Interorganizational Relations in Disaster Response in Developing Context: Assessing Response to Beirut Explosion. *Public Organization Review*, 23, 1167–1193. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11115-022-00650-9>
- Huse, G. B. (2014). *A Dangerous Sideshow: The US and the Lebanese Civil War, 1975-1976*. [Master's thesis, University of Oslo].
- Johnson, M. (1986). *Class and Client in Beirut: The Sunni Muslim Community and the Lebanese State, 1840–1985*. London: Ithaca Press.
- Kachar, S (2023). Political change in a pluralistic society: the experience of Fouad Chehab. Saer Al Mashreq.
- Little, D. (1996). His Finest Hour? Eisenhower, Lebanon, and the 1958 Middle East Crisis. *Diplomatic History*, 20(1), 27–54. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24913444>
- R. Sorby, K. (2000). Lebanon: The Crisis of 1958. *Asian and African Studies*, 9(1), 76-109. 1335-1257.
- ROMERO, J. (2012). Discourse and Mediation in the Lebanese Crisis of 1958. *Middle Eastern Studies*, 48(4), 567–587. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41721153>
- Salibi, K. (1958). The Lebanese Crisis in Perspective. *The World Today*, 14(9), 369-380.
- Salibi, K. (1961). Lebanon since the Crisis of 1958. *The World Today*, 17(1), 32-42.
- Salibi, K. (1966). Lebanon under Fuad Chehab 1958-1964. *Middle Eastern Studies*, 2(3), 211–226. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4282160>
- Sivaraman, S., & Varadharajan, S. (2021). Investigative consequence analysis: a case study research of Beirut explosion accident. *Journal of Loss Prevention in the Process Industries*, 69, 104387. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jlp.2020.104387>
- Wilson, C. F. (2017). *The Independent State and the State of Independence: Chehabism's Challenge to Lebanese Democratic Stability* [Master's thesis, King's College London].
- Wilson, D. N. (2003). *The Eisenhower Doctrine and its Implementation in Lebanon—1958* (Master's thesis, The University of Texas at Austin).