Introduction

*Ma dama al-shabab m’ana fainana la shaka najihun*

With the youth at our side, there is no doubt we will succeed.¹

This slogan from the Kataʾib, a Lebanese youth organization, reflects a sentiment shared across the globe in the twentieth century: “youth,” however defined – by age, class, gender, race – mattered. Kataʾib leadership knew this, and surely had the youth with them, whether measured by the tens of thousands of young members, their investment in the group’s ideology, or their participation in party rituals. In July 1958, for example, the group held a ceremony for new members at its headquarters in Beirut, Bayt al-Kataʾib, or the “Kataʾib home.” In the space that hosted many gatherings, ranging from lectures to sports tournaments, young men and women congregated alongside party officials and supporters to “perform the oath” (*taʾdiyya al-yamin*). This included the routine dedication to party and nation, “in service of Lebanon,” another party slogan since the 1930s. Thereafter, recruits received membership cards from their president, Pierre Gemayel, who congratulated each individual on his or her “engagement in the new party life.”² The event then ended with the singing of the Kataʾib anthem, played by its very own band.

In a nearby neighborhood of Beirut, another youth organization paired music and pageantry in late 1958. Najjadeh members marched through the streets of Basta close to its home, Bayt al-Najjadeh. An observer describes the festival as follows:

During a visit to Basta area on 20 August, Major Boldt, Major Pendergast and I were present during a parade. The parade took place at 1715 and included approximately 120 men mostly in khaki uniforms, the majority armed with French-British rifles with a band in front, 5 drums and scouts... [.] The parade

---

¹ This slogan was taken from the famous Egyptian nationalist Saad Zaghloul. Lebanese Kataʾib Party, *Ilā al-Shabab* [To the Youth] (1940). Lebanese Kataʾib Party Files, Linda Sadaqah Collection, American University of Beirut.

was welcomed by nearly the whole population in the area it passed by and many people fired their guns because of happiness; it is a miracle that nobody was hurt.\(^3\) These types of events, showcasing the size, order, rituals, and culture of youth-centric organizations, were commonplace in twentieth-century Lebanon. What was unique about these two particular gatherings is their timing – the summer of 1958, in the midst of a war that witnessed 4,000 deaths. Perhaps this is one reason the individual above, United Nations observer Captain Friis of the Royal Danish Army, was shocked that no was injured. Friis also wrote that these young Najjadeh members were “the soldiers who fought” in the war for the fate of Lebanon, and that when “all the trouble had settled down, then they would make a march through the town.”\(^4\)

The particular context of 1958 is even more palpable in the Kata ʾib oathing festival, as described in a report included in the group’s newspaper, al-ʿAmal (“the Action”). After the young recruits were lined up, George ʿAmireh, a member of the Kata ʾib leadership council, told them that in the face of the “enmity of our enemies,” which included the Najjadeh, “we will not surrender (lan nastaslīm).” As long as they were still fighting, working, and sweating, ʿAmireh stressed that the Kata ʾib, and its vision for Lebanon, “will not die.”\(^5\) Indeed, with the youth by their side, the Kata ʾib and Najjadeh believed there was no doubt they could succeed in their goals, wartime or otherwise.

*Winning Lebanon* takes up this history of youth politics in mid-twentieth-century Lebanon. In this period, well before the devastating Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990), the majority of young people were politically engaged and active. This context allows for a multilayered exploration of young men and women as more than victims of a broken political system or a war-torn country. Instead, they were participants in community belonging, the site of power politics, agents of popular culture, and the producers of radical social change. To investigate these various roles, this book focuses on a particular subset of young socio-political actors, what I refer to collectively as “popular organizations,” with special attention to their rituals and cultures. These types of groups are diverse, including scout and sports organizations – like the Kata ʾib and Najjadeh – social justice movements, transnational student clubs, and workers’ associations, all with populist, anti-colonial, and

---

3 AG-020, United Nations Office for Special Affairs (1955–1991). S-0166, United Nations Observation Group in Lebanon (UNOGIL), Situation in Basta Area, Friis to Chief of Staff, August 19, 1958. *Records of the United Nations Archives and Record Management*, New York. While Friis does not mention the Najjadeh by name, they were the only youth group to have its headquarters in Basta and wear khaki uniforms.

4 Ibid.

anti–elite agendas. With popular organizations at the center, I ask what are they, how did they become popular, in what ways did they expand their base, and why and how did they participate in the 1958 War?

From New York to Calcutta, these types of youth–centric organizations ruled the street during the mid–twentieth century. They waved flags and banners in public and gathered in houses and group headquarters to practice politics. With their shared platforms, styles, and rituals, they constitute a global phenomenon that this book explores in the Lebanese milieu; an area of study that currently lacks a focus on the history and culture of youth politics. I frame this study in terms of how these organizations attempted to “win” Lebanon: demographically, by adding more members and new types of members; symbolically, by pushing their own, distinct image of Lebanon; and politically, by gaining access to official and unofficial power structures. I find that these intermediaries, and their rich primary source material, provide a window into the world inhabited by young people, between adult mobilization strategies and their own youthful experiences.

The central argument of Winning Lebanon is that these predominantly middle–class, professional, and non–elite actors were critical to the making of modern Lebanon and the broader Middle East in three particular ways. First, they established a distinct type of popular politics, populism, which was centered around young people, and against elites, colonialism, and the status quo. Second, they encouraged the political socialization of new groups and categories of people outside educated, middle–class, male youth, such as young women, rural and working–class populations, and diasporic youth that lived outside Lebanon. Third, in the midst of the 1958 War, popular organizations helped produce sectarian violence. Discursively, the way that popular organizations and others explained and justified the conflict fused categories that had once defied sectarianism, specifically youth and youthfulness, to the unfolding violence. Whether that linkage was explicit – the enemy’s youth as sectarian – or coded – the enemy’s youth as “punks” – or whether it was detailed by combatants at the time or observers thereafter, conceiving of youth as prone to violence was a new feature in the historical construction of sectarianism. Furthermore, and in terms of group participation and practices during the war, the environment of 1958 that they shaped was unique in that the violence was performed by young people, it was fought across the country, and it was typified by populist rhetoric. In words and actions, this is not unlike subsequent moments of so–called sectarian violence in the Middle East or beyond in the twentieth and twenty–first centuries.

To demonstrate this significance, Winning Lebanon takes a bottom–up approach, examining the cultural production (i.e., textual, oral,
aural, and visual sources, ranging from organizational newspapers to group songs), rituals (learning, marching, and playing), and youth cultures (belonging, sociability, and discipline) of these types of groups. The book starts in the 1920s, when the first popular organizations were founded during the French mandate era (1920–1943), and ends in 1958, in the midst of Lebanon’s first war of the early independence period (1943–1958). The remainder of this introduction sketches the history of these types of groups, and the fields of study that they are linked to, including popular politics, populism, young people, and sectarianism.

The History of Popular Politics, Populism, and Popular Organizations in Modern Lebanon

At the turn of the twentieth century, inhabitants of the Ottoman Empire witnessed a set of major transformations. They ranged from the seizing of Ottoman lands in North Africa by the French and British to the increase of government-run schools throughout the remaining provinces. Perhaps most important for the history of mass or popular politics in modern Lebanon was the creation of a public sphere. Across the empire, and particularly in its city centers (Istanbul, Cairo, Beirut, Damascus), individuals experienced the impacts of urban planning, the growth of the printing press, and the saturation of coffee-houses, where these developments and more were discussed. In this new meeting ground, those concerned about a changing world, whether under Ottoman centralization or European colonialism, began to form “associations,” or jamʿiyyat in Arabic. Associations provided an opportunity for the often male students and middle-class professionals, who were also a product of these transformations, to mobilize beyond and against the state. The most famous were the Young Ottomans and Young Turk movement in Istanbul, active since the 1860s, the National Party in Alexandria, led by Mustafa Kamil and founded in the 1890s, and the Young Tunisians of Tunis, which was inspired by the Young Turk Revolution of 1908. Although their ideologies diverged, they were united in their use of the public sphere, principally in the form of public meetings and demonstrations, the use of newspapers and journals, and their forward thinking, typified by the use of “young” (fata in Arabic or jön in Turkish), the “youth” (al-shabab in Arabic or

---

6 For more information on the centrality of the public sphere in Arab popular politics, see James L. Gelvin, Divided Loyalties: Nationalism and Mass Politics in Syria at the Close of Empire (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998).
This was also the context in which extra-governmental associations took shape in Bilad al-Sham, or “Greater Syria,” and its largest, most cosmopolitan port: Beirut. They included Butrus al-Bustani’s Syrian Association, linked to the Arabic Nahda (or “renaissance”) movement, and the transregional leftist networks that ran through Beirut. They included Butrus al-Bustani’s Syrian Association, linked to the Arabic Nahda (or “renaissance”) movement, and the transregional leftist networks that ran through Beirut. Like their counterparts in Istanbul or Cairo, these groups were common in their anti-colonial platforms, nationalist – or localist – pride, and forward-looking visions. These traits were only solidified in the tumultuous context of the second decade of twentieth-century Bilad al-Sham. The Ottoman Empire’s entrance into the Great War in late 1914, the Entente’s naval blockade of the Eastern Mediterranean in 1915, the imposition of Ottoman martial law in Bilad al-Sham starting in 1915, and a few crippling winters throughout the war led to the death of hundreds of thousands and the forced migration – within and well beyond the Eastern Mediterranean – of many more. Also destroyed was the Ottoman Empire and its control over its Arab provinces, including Beirut and Damascus. Following the Treaty of Sevres in 1920, the two provinces and others nearby were fully separated, and granted to France as the “mandates” of Syria and Lebanon. While the League of Nations member state promised “progressive development” in its mandates, Lebanon was little more than a colonial holding. This was the particular milieu in which the first youth-centric organizations emerged. Like earlier generations of associations, these groups used the public sphere as their launching point. Unlike others, however, they not only embodied the concept of young, but targeted young people as the panacea to the unprecedented trauma caused by the Great War and drivers of a brighter future.

From the 1920s to 1940s in mandate Lebanon, these youth-centric organizations used the weapons of the public sphere to challenge French colonialism and the elites that supported it. These elites, or zu’ama’, were the traditional holders of political, social, and economic power in the Arab provinces of the Ottoman world since the sixteenth century. The zu’ama’ also represented the community they came from – Sunni

7 For more information on these earliest associations and their intellectual milieu, see Albert Hourani, Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 1798–1939 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); and Jens Hanssen and Max Weiss, eds., Arabic Thought beyond the Liberal Age: Towards an Intellectual History of the Nahda (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).


Muslims in coastal Lebanon, Shi'i Muslims in the south, and Druze, Maronite Christian, or Greek Orthodox in Mount Lebanon. Their claim to kinship, coupled with their roles as patrons, providers, and protectors, made the zu'ama' a fixture in Lebanese politics. Yet, their privileged, intermediary positions were complicated by both the transformations in the public sphere and the emerging relationship between these leaders and colonial powers. These shifts in the early twentieth century gave youth-centric movements, whether they were organized according to sect or not, or even when their leaders were from the landed elite, a platform to draw recruits away from traditional sources of power. In petitions, speeches, and slogans, these groups distinguished the complicity, corruption, and outdatedness of the zu'ama' to the virtue of al-sha'b, or “the people.” Such stances led to the repression of these groups, ranging from the jailing of members to the forced exile of leaders. At the same time, their stand against the status quo, as well as their novelty in distinction to it, cemented their populist and radical credentials.

After the Lebanese gained their independence in 1943, and the French fully terminated the mandates of Lebanon and Syria in 1946 following World War II, youth-centric organizations had the chance to transform to political parties and make up the parliamentary and governmental system. While these groups ranged in their willingness to join in state building, they all grew during the postindependence period. They held large festivals to commemorate their achievements, established branch offices throughout and outside the country, and even participated in national elections. Even though they often did not win any seats (at least until the 1960s), they were influencers through their styles, newspapers, sizable memberships, and ideologies. They may have shared the vision that youth would build the future, but all mobilized different ideologies to get there. They hinged on their understanding of Lebanon's relationship to the region and globe. Some groups were Lebanese nationalist, in support of the government’s conception of Lebanon as independent, diverse, and nonaligned. Others thought of Lebanon as part of a broader, fully integrated Arab world. Others were socialist or communist, and went even further, conceiving of Lebanon as part of an international, anti-colonial front.

Accordingly, rivalries between groups were as common as clashes with the police. Yet, there were no major disputes between different varieties of movements in the first thirty years of their respective histories.10 This

peace was shattered in the 1950s. The pressures associated with the Arab-Israeli conflicts of the late 1940s to early 1950s, the international Cold War and subsequent pro-West and anti-colonial defensive pacts, the authoritarianism of Lebanese President Camille Chamoun, and the Union of Egypt and Syria under Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser in February 1958, culminated with the 1958 War in Lebanon. Most of the youth-centric organizations at the middle of *Winning Lebanon* participated in this war, some on the side of the government, others against it.

***

Scholars of modern Lebanon have taken up this history before, referring to these groups operating in the fields of popular and youth politics in the twentieth century as “political parties,” “ideological parties,” or “paramilitary youth organizations.” Michael W. Suleiman’s *Political Parties in Lebanon: The Challenge of aFragmented Political Culture* (1967) was the first, and only, English-language study to take these groups in Lebanon as a whole and follow them from their founding to the contemporary. Those after often focused on only one group in relation to others. Simply stated, I believe there is a critical need for an updated historical evaluation of these types of groups. First, I find the terminology of “parties,” which is still utilized to study these groupings, limits the scope of analysis. This is because the logic that undergirds this term is based on modernization theory, which views democracy and its political actors, political parties, as the most evolved. On one level, groups that were not political parties, including scout and social clubs, are then left out of the fold. On another level, even for the groups that used the term “party” (or in Arabic, *hizb*), the English translation appears rigid and teleological—that is, a certain group always wanted to be a parliamentary actor, even before they could legally organize as one. Moreover, the emphasis on party politics favors descriptions of ideology and sect makeup over equally important traits that *Winning Lebanon* takes up, including the everyday life, practices, and

---


rituals of these groups. Indeed, these groups do not only provide a survey into the ideologies of the time, but the cultural milieu of youth politics.\footnote{My methodology of using rituals to “read” culture is inspired by the work of historians and anthropologists alike. They include Natalie Zemon Davis, “The Rites of Violence: Religious Riot in Sixteenth-Century France,” Past & Present 59 (1973): 91–91; Clifford Geertz, “Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight,” Daedalus 134, no. 4 (2005): 56–86; and Bertram Wyatt-Brown, Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).}

The second need for this study is historiographical in thrust. In the last sixty years, scholarship on these organizations has shifted from overall optimistic to pessimistic, with little revaluation of this shift in knowledge. Before the Lebanese Civil War of 1975–1990, many political scientists argued that these grassroots organizations fostered political openness, cross-sect dialogue, and modernization to the benefit of Lebanon.\footnote{For studies that paint these groups favorably, see Yamak, The Syrian Social Nationalist Party; Suleiman, Political Parties in Lebanon; and Entelis, Pluralism and Party Transformation in Lebanon.} These hypotheses were, of course, complicated by the war. As these groups were the center of the fighting throughout the 1970s to 1990s, they have, in turn, been positioned at the center of scholarly explanations for the war.\footnote{For three examples, see Kamal Salibi, Crossroads to Civil War: Lebanon 1958–1976 (Ann Arbor, MI: Caravan Books, 1976); Farid el-Khazen, The Breakdown of the State in Lebanon 1967–1976 (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2000); and Samir Khalaf, Civil and Uncivil Violence in Lebanon: A History of the Internationalization of Communal Conflict (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).} This violent reality, however, is often projected onto the earliest history of these groups in the 1920s to 1950s.\footnote{For two prime examples of this trend, see Itamar Rabinovich, The War for Lebanon, 1970–1985, revised ed. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985); and William Harris, Faces of Lebanon: Sects, Wars, and Global Extensions (Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener Publishers, 1997).} While I acknowledge and unpack the cultural and social roots of violence within these groups in the following chapters, I find that overemphasizing their trajectory from good party to bad militia works to obscure the popularity and mundanity of these groups well before the 1970s. For these reasons, I study these groups ethnographically, in all their subjectivity and transformations, from their own sources, for the sake of understanding the youth cultures that are shaped by them. In short, then, Winning Lebanon is a cultural history of youth politics and youth organization in the mid-twentieth century.

Additionally, I use the more flexible term “popular organizations” when discussing these actors of Lebanon’s youth politics as a whole. I define popular organizations as a class of groups emerging in Lebanon during the first half of the twentieth century. They ranged from athletic clubs to labor unions. Some represented certain sects while others did not. Some can be
characterized as youth movements based on the average age of their members, while others embodied youthful energies and ideas. Regardless of these differences, the groups were collectively grassroots, urban-based, and dominated by middle-class young men, although the class, gender, and geographic components of these groups would change by the 1940s to 1950s. Their leaders, often middle-class male professionals, mobilized populist discourses, claiming to support and defend the people and popular demands. While these demands varied from group to group and depend on context, all popular organizations claimed to be anti-colonial and protested against establishment politics.

Accordingly, these groups were pivotal to, but not an exclusive part of, contentious and popular politics in mid-twentieth-century Lebanon. A number of scholars have focused on mass-based movements, popular politics, and the public sphere in twentieth-century Lebanon. Even more have done such in the field of modern Middle East history. Yet, there are very few that engage directly with the term “populism,” or shaʿbiyya. My understanding and deployment of the term is informed by particular studies that define populism as a discursive frame within popular politics, centered on notions of the people (in-group, al-shaʿb).


19 Gelvin and Bashkin are rare exceptions. Gelvin incorporates literature on populism into his analysis of the Syrian Arab Kingdom of 1918–1920, discussing the role that the populist “discursive field” (our true nation vs. elite exploitation) played in the creation of Syrian popular committees. Gelvin, Divided Loyalties, 207–220. And while Bashkin does not draw on populism studies in her work on Iraq in the interwar period, she does explore a social movement in mid-1930s Iraq called shaʿbiyya, or what she refers to as “people-ism,” which was socially conscious, democratic, and leftist. Bashkin, The Other Iraq, 67–68. Similarly, all popular organizations in Lebanon distinguished their just cause from “the other,” all supported pluralism (even those that adapted fascist aesthetics), all eventually promoted cross-class solidarity, and all served as a venue to discuss plans meant to alleviate poverty.
10 Introduction

and the elite (out-group, al-zuʿamaʾ).20 With their critical distinction between the leaders/system and the people/youth, populism was elemental to the ethos and culture of the organizations at the crux of *Winning Lebanon*. Moreover, both in the context of the 1958 War, and the later civil war in Lebanon, a particular populist discourse (in short, our just, popular cause vs. their abomination) was central to group justifications for war.21 For these reasons, I considered populism a key mode by which to enrich our understanding of popular politics and popular organizations, both when comparing group to group, and as a collective field.

The popular organizations that constitute the subsequent analysis include:

- **Lebanese People’s Party** (al-Hizb al-Shaʿb al-Lubnani) – a workers’ association founded in 1924 by journalist Yusuf Yazbak and labor activist Fuad al-Shamali; later became known as the Lebanese Communist Party (al-Hizb al-Shiyuʿi al-Lubnani)
- **Syrian Social Nationalist Party** (al-Hizb al-Suri al-Qawmi al-Ijtimaʿi) – a social club founded in 1932 by journalist and teacher Antoun Saadeh
- **Lebanese Kataʾib (“Phalanx”) Organization** (Munazzamat al-Kataʾib al-Lubnaniyya or in French, Phalanges Libanaises) – a youth club founded in 1936 by pharmacist and football enthusiast Pierre Gemayel
- **Najjadeh (“ Helpers”) Organization** (Munazzamat al-Najjadeh) – a scout movement founded in 1937 by newspaper owner and parliamentarian Muhyi al-Din al-Nasuli
- **Talaʾiʿ (“Vanguard”) Organization** (Munazzamat al-Talaʾiʿ) – a youth club founded in 1944 by philanthropist and parliamentarian Rashid Baydun
- **Progressive Socialist Party** (al-Hizb al-Ishtiraki al-Taqaddumi) – a social justice movement founded in 1949 by intellectual and parliamentarian Kamal Jumblatt