SHIFTING IDENTITIES, RECONSTRUCTING BOUNDARIES.
THE CASE OF A MULTI-CONFESSIONAL LOCALITY
IN POST-WAR LEBANON

BY

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In the Western understanding of the Middle East, religion has often been mentioned as the main reason for conflicts, outbreaks of violence, civil war and wars in the region. Unchanging religious identities rooted in people’s traditions are still considered the main hindrance to modernity, development and peace.\(^1\) Lebanon is often described as the worst case of all with its seventeen officially registered religious communities and fifteen years of protracted civil war, and “Lebanisation” has even become the international term for ethnic-religious clashes worldwide.\(^2\)

In constrast to interpretations that see outbreaks of violence as the result of age-old religious passions, I follow approaches arguing that Lebanese confessional identities cannot be taken as a deep-rooted social reality but as having been actively produced, and reproduced in an on-going process. This (re-)construction process has become more and more globalised as a result of rural-urban and transnational migration and wartime displacement, all of which led to the emergence of deterritorialised social spaces. Social actors are now re-negotiating their confessional identities on a translocal and transnational scale in the interaction between local, regional, and national actors at different junctures in history.\(^3\)

\(^1\) This argumentation is commonly found in popular media discourses on the Middle East.
\(^3\) On the making of identities in a translocal social field, see case-study on...
By presenting the case study of a multi-confessional (Shiite, Greek-Catholic and Maronite) community in Lebanon which has been deeply marked by civil war, displacement and transnational migration, I will focus on these dynamic processes of (re-) producing confessional and local identities and shifting boundaries.¹

The Making of Confessional Identities

In his book “Ethnic Groups and Boundaries“, ⁵ Frederik Barth challenges the essentialist approach to ethnicity, paving the way for a new understanding of group identities.⁶

Barth analyses the production of group identities as dynamic and strategic processes, whereby he particularly focuses on the