

Lebanon: No 'Civil War' This Time **Georges Corm**

Israel as a "Jewish state," to quote the title of the book by Theodor Herzl who founded the Zionist Movement in 1897, was in trouble from the start. It came up against a tradition of religious pluralism in the Middle East that had held for more than 1,000 years, embracing Christian members of the Eastern Church and Muslims (Sunni, Druze, Shia and Alawite). In Palestine, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq and Egypt, all the religious communities, including the Jewish communities, lived in close juxtaposition (1). Any proposal to establish a state exclusively for Jews in this pluralist environment was bound to encounter strong resistance.

The Christians in Palestine, Lebanon and Syria were first to sound the alarm on the Arab side. Early in the 20th century they realised the threat that such a state would represent: in it, a community swollen by an influx of people from outside the region (Ashkenazi Jews fleeing persecution in Russia and eastern Europe) would hold a monopoly on power. Eastern Christians saw that the Zionist project, supported by the European colonial powers, would inevitably be perceived as a crusade and as such would damage centuries of good relations between Christians and Muslims in the Middle East. If the project were successful, some members of the local Christian communities might seek to establish a Christian state, on the principle that they had just as much right to do so as Jews from outside the region.

The Jewish settlers were inclined to regard the Christian minorities in the Middle East as potential allies, even before the state of Israel was established. But they were disappointed. The Christians in the Greater Lebanese state established under French mandate in 1919 remained mostly indifferent. The Lebanese poet Charles Corm (who wrote in French) called on Lebanon to return to its Phoenician roots: in this he was not seeking to follow the Zionist pattern but to establish a modern form of Lebanese nationalism that would transcend the divisions between Christians and Muslims. In the same period Egyptian nationalists looked back to the age of the Pharaohs and the first Iraqi nationalists invoked their glorious Babylonian heritage.

Michel Chiha, a brilliant and influential Lebanese journalist who also wrote in French and loved France, constantly warned the Lebanese against the destabilising effect that an Israeli state would have throughout the Middle East. He foresaw that Lebanese pluralism would be attacked as the antithesis of Israeli exclusiveness. Youakim Moubarac, a Maronite priest who wrote extensively about the dialogue between Islam and Christianity and the central role of Lebanon and Palestine, probably did most to warn the Lebanese of the testing times they would face with the emergence of the state of Israel (2).

Therefore it was no surprise that the Lebanese army fought alongside other Arab armies in the 1948 war in response to the declaration of the state of Israel. An armistice between Lebanon and Israel was signed in 1949. The Lebanese army wisely refrained from taking part in the 1967 war, during which Israel took the Sinai Peninsula from Egypt, the Golan Heights from Syria, and seized control of East Jerusalem, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

But Lebanon did not escape the heightened tensions in the Middle East. With its free democratic system and broad political spectrum, it became a sounding board for the increased tensions throughout the Arab world that resulted from Israel's victory in 1967.

The scale of the defeat suffered by the Arab countries and the occupation of the whole of Palestine had a devastating effect on Palestinian society and strengthened the armed movements recruiting in the Palestinian refugee camps. This was particularly true in Jordan and Lebanon, which had the largest number of refugees in relation to their size and their population.

The Palestinian resistance movements extended their hold in Lebanon after they were driven out of Jordan by its army in the 1969 Black September operation. They launched periodic cross-border guerrilla attacks on Israel, which led to massive reprisals from the Israeli army against the countries in which they were based. In December 1968 an airborne Israeli commando unit destroyed the whole Lebanese fleet of civilian aircraft. This had serious political repercussions in Lebanon and it became obvious that the Lebanese government was unable to act.

The 1973 war

After the Arab-Israeli war of 1973, when Syria and Egypt were rapidly repelled and agreed to a ceasefire, Lebanon was the sole remaining theatre of operations in the conflict with Israel (3). This opened the way for the conflagration of 1975, when the country regarded by many Palestinians as a model for a future secular, democratic Palestine where Jews, Christians and Muslims would live together on an equal footing, descended into violence (4).

A coalition of secular parties banded together to form the Lebanese National Movement which supported the armed Palestinian groups. The movement included various Nasserite elements in the Sunni community, the Communist party, the Syrian People's party and the Progressive Socialist party under Walid Jumblatt's father, Kamal Jumblatt.

On the other side, the Phalangist party, under the influence of Charles Malik, a former foreign minister close to the United States, prepared to do battle. It claimed to unite all Christians under the banner of a Lebanese Front, which would release Lebanon from the grip of the Palestinian revolutionaries and their supporters in the Soviet Union and "radical" Arab countries.

For Israel, the situation in Lebanon (exacerbated by Israel's policy of massive reprisals) meant that an old strategic plan dating to the early 1950s was once more on the agenda. The idea was to encourage the establishment in Lebanon of a Christian state that would serve as an ally of the Jewish state and justify its existence in the Middle East. The Israeli army invaded southern Lebanon in 1978 and advanced to the Litani river, in keeping with David Ben-Gurion's original plan. There it established a militia composed of auxiliaries poached from the Lebanese army, under the command of a dissident Christian officer. In April 1979 it proclaimed a state of "Free Lebanon" in an area of 800 sq km; the Israeli army occupied this until 2000, in breach of UN Security Council resolution 425. The Syrian army had entered Lebanon in the spring of 1976 to stop the combined forces of the Palestinian movements and the national movement advancing on Lebanese Front strongholds (5), but the parties of the Front now entered into relations with Israel, with the blessing of the United States. A joint strategy was gradually devised for imposing a complete change of policy on Lebanon. Israel would invade Lebanon again, the Phalangists would take advantage of the situation to seize power and make peace with Israel under US auspices, and the armed Palestinian movements would be eliminated. The strategy was implemented in 1982. Israeli troops under General Ariel Sharon invaded Lebanon, besieged Beirut from June to the end of August, and established a Phalangist government with support from the western powers, Saudi Arabia and Egypt.

In an aggressive move, the Lebanese parliament elected a Phalangist president, Bashir Gemayel, and -- after he was assassinated -- his brother Amin. The new government signed an inequitable peace treaty with Israel in 1983 under pressure from the US.

At the same time 200,000 Christians in the Chouf, a mountainous region southeast of Beirut, were forcibly ejected, after the Israeli army, before it withdrew from the area, encouraged the Christian and Druze militias to set upon each other.

The armed organisations of the secular Lebanese parties, pillars of the resistance against the occupation since 1978, were disarmed and pursued by the Phalangist government with the active support of the multinational intervention force. This had been sent to Lebanon in 1982 to help expel the Palestinian fighters and protect the civilian population, with the results that the world witnessed in the massacres in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps. Conditions were ripe for the rise of Hizbullah (the party of God), inspired by the religious revolution in Iran, and recruiting in the Shia community; and for its enduring campaign to end the Israeli occupation in the south.

Meltdown

Lebanon had refused to be drawn into the orbit of the US and Israel, but its communities were in meltdown. In 1990-91 the western powers handed control of it to Syria as a reward for supporting the coalition against Iraq. Lebanon became a Saudi-Syrian condominium: Rafik Hariri, a trusted friend of the Saudi Arabian royal family, was appointed prime minister and under his leadership (1992-98 and 2000-04), Lebanon was swamped by an unprecedented wave of financial and property speculation. The state went into \$40bn debt while friends and relations, hangers-on, Arab princes, Syrian officers, local banks and investment funds made fortunes. UN Security resolution 1559, adopted in September 2004, questioned the fragile status of Lebanon. Following the invasion of Iraq, the US, in keeping with its plan for a "new Middle East", could not allow Lebanon to remain within the orbit of Syria and Iran. The US views Hizbullah as an arm of the Syria-Iran axis, to be eradicated. The resolution ruled out any extension to the term of office of the Lebanese president, Emile Lahoud, regarded as the mainstay of Hizbullah, and called for the withdrawal of Syrian troops, the deployment of the Lebanese army in southern Lebanon, and the disarmament of all militias. This meant both Hizbullah and the armed Palestinian organisations. But in the eyes of Lebanon and the Arab world, Hizbullah is not a terrorist organisation: it is the resistance. In an unusually shortsighted move, France took the initiative in drafting this resolution, perhaps to mend fences with the US after their disagreement over Iraq. But the effect on Lebanon has been catastrophic: a return to the situation between 1975 and 1990, when the country was a focus for confrontation between all the warring forces in the Middle East. Plans to reoccupy southern Lebanon were set in motion. At the same time, after Hariri's assassination (for which Syria came under suspicion), the US and France busily made sure that the new government would be sympathetic to US views.

The Security Council also looked into Hariri's assassination, adopting an impressive series of resolutions on setting up an internal commission of inquiry and later an international tribunal, and insisting that the Lebanese government comply with resolution 1559. This burst of activity by the supreme UN body is in remarkable contrast to its passive attitude this July, when Israel took the whole Lebanese nation hostage, destroying entire regions, killing hundreds of people and forcing tens of thousands to flee their homes.

A thorn in Israel's side

Lebanon is a thorn in the side of Israel, but the "international community" supports or cravenly acquiesces in Israel's extraordinary acts of aggression and the measures it has taken against what is left of Palestine. Even so, the US-Israeli partnership had no more success with its surgical strikes in 2006 than it had in 1982, when Lebanon endured years of agony just as Palestine does now. There is surely a danger that the clash of civilisations, that theoretical framework for the "war against terror" and

"Islamic fascism" advocated by the US administration, will once again lead to bloody internecine feuds between communities in Lebanon. Can Lebanon's reputation as a symbol of religious pluralism, so inimical to the Israelis, survive this fresh onslaught? It is encouraging to see that most Lebanese Christians are now standing by the intellectual and political values described above, unlike their reaction in 1975.

General Michel Aoun, the former commander-in-chief of the Lebanese army who tried in vain to boot the Syrians out of Lebanon in 1989-90, is now the most popular figure in the Christian community. He is a child of the southern suburbs of Beirut and identifies with the misfortunes visited on his country, especially on the Shia community whose homes have been destroyed. In taking this stand, he has done something to block the internecine feuds that the extraordinary violence of the Israeli attacks sought to provoke. Discord is the best weapon that Israel and its US allies have as they try again, as in 1982, to break this rebel nation and bring it into line.

Lebanese civil society has shown admirable courage in the face of all its misfortunes. Will the voices predicting a clash of civilizations ultimately prevail, or will Lebanon which, together with Palestine, has borne the full weight of the Israeli war machine since 1975, be overcome by lassitude? Will the many gaps in UN Security Council resolution 1701 be exploited, enabling Israel and the US to bend the Lebanese government to their will and continue to meddle in Lebanese internal affairs as they have done since resolution 1559 was adopted?

Many Lebanese would like their country to stand aside from the conflict between Israel and Palestine, to sever its links with Syria, and to become a Monte Carlo for oil-rich emirs in President George Bush's new Middle East. This is a poor ambition and would disable Lebanon in its efforts to meet historic challenges. There is a looming spectre of Middle Eastern civil wars, fomented by the US in Iraq under the pretence of bringing democracy, and confrontations between Sunni and Shia, fuelled by client Arab regimes under US influence.

Lebanon's disintegration is part of the plan of Israel and the US. It would open the way to greater chaos and more suffering. Will Lebanon manage to prevent this, and maintain the remarkable solidarity of all its communities in the face of aggression? Only time will tell.

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