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In danger of peace

Lebanon is the land of opposites *par excellence*. Everything and anything in Lebanon defies simple descriptions and explanations: its ancient history, its more modern performance as a nation state, its politics, its social fabric and its culture. Each feature amalgamates and reconciles normally incompatible elements, calling for convoluted and circuitous explications with endless qualifications, digressions and codicils. It is no wonder that foreigners, and even more so its own inhabitants, give up their attempts to make sense of it and eventually take it as it is – or leave it.

Like so many other countries of the third world, its establishment as a modern state was the result of fortuity, contingency and a matter of convenience – for others, of course. Nothing in its past history predisposed it for such a destiny. There are few objective facts or episodes. Such as they are, modern nationalist historians have retrospectively and tardily patched up to compose a coherent and seamless narrative, recounting time and again the story of a small, fierce and determined people which has, since the days of the Phoenicians some 3,000 years ago, struggled to defend its independence. Thereafter, following a rather confused chronology and genealogy, the feats of this refined, urban and maritime people are allegedly carried on by uncouth, mountainous and distrustful populations, who take refuge in the high grounds overlooking the Mediterranean coast to flee from some not always clearly defined danger or oppressor.

Foremost among these communities are the Maronites who, according to differing accounts, established themselves in Mount Lebanon – in the north of the present state – in the seventh century to evade the exactions of the Byzantines or of the Muslims. Then there are the Druze, Arab tribes by descent who, for some indeterminate reason converted in the tenth century to a hermetic and esoteric religion;

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followed by the Shiites, another dissident Islamic group, dating back to the seventh century, which splintered from the main Sunnite Islamic core over the issue of the succession to the Prophet Mohammad. Innumerable other arcane eastern Christian communities also settled in Mount Lebanon in the course of history.

The myth-ridden, Lebanese nationalist historical account would not stand any serious scrutiny. Modern Lebanese bear no relation to their alleged Phoenician ancestors, nor did the motley populations who lived in Mount Lebanon ever strive to become a nation, let alone create a state of their own. True, during the Ottoman period, on two occasions, tribal-cum-feudal warlords succeeded in consolidating their rule over the Mountain. Then, in the 19th century, still under Ottoman rule, Mount Lebanon was set up as a semi-autonomous province. However, none of these episodes could in itself account for the creation in 1920 of the independent State of Greater Lebanon. This owed its existence to the designs of the French colonial power entrusted with a mandate over Syria following WWI. Having failed to strike a deal acknowledging French ascendancy in Syria with Faysal, leader of the Arab Revolt, France expelled the Arab Emir and carved up his Syrian dominion into several truncated states in line with the time-honoured colonial precept *divide et impera*. The State of Greater Lebanon, comprising Mount Lebanon proper plus the coastline with Beirut, Tripoli, Sidon and Byblos, as well as the rich Bekaa valley, constituted one of these contrived entities.

Since its establishment, the existence of the State of Lebanon has been contested by one group or another of its inhabitants. Today, some 80 years later, its existence as an independent state is still open to doubt. In between, it has known glorious days and experienced a bitter and implacable 15-year civil and regional war. And all that time, Lebanon has bucked the trend of events in the Middle East. In the 1950s and 60s, for instance, when the Arab world was in the throes of its revolutionary fervour, Lebanon witnessed prosperity and stability. When, in the rest of the Arab world nationalism reigned supreme, promising to sweep away the artificial states established earlier by the colonial powers, Lebanon went on its own way, consolidating its political institutions. Finally, when most of the Arab world embraced socialism and experimented with a controlled economy, Lebanon adopted an unbridled liberal economic system – and got away with it.

This was Lebanon's heyday, when the country prospered and life seemed sweet and easy. Beirut rose to unsurpassed heights to become the main financial, commercial, tourist, educational and cultural hub of the Near East. Its skyscrapers, its luxurious shops, its banks, its restaurants, its night-life, its cultural creativity and, in short, its uninterrupted bustling activity, symbolised its meteoric rise. Money seemed to pour in from all sides. From the West and from the East. Indeed, this miraculous success resided in Lebanon's role as a relay station between the West and the Arab East, channelling the circulation of commodities and capital between the two poles. Western products passed through Lebanon en route to the Arab interior, while Arab capital was deposited in Lebanese banks before being reinvested elsewhere. In the process, Lebanese tradesmen and intermediaries deducted their share of the profits.

At the same time, taking advantage of the unbridled freedom of expression, association and economic activity tolerated in the country, in sharp contrast to the rest of the Arab world where regimes increasingly restricted all unofficial reflection and utterances, the wealthy and cosmopolitan former elites of Egypt, Syria, Iraq and Palestine, as well as the less fortunate intellectuals, radicals and revolutionaries of the Arab world, or mere students from all over the Middle East, attracted by its prestigious universities, flocked into Beirut. The city added another feather to its cap and turned into the intellectual centre of the Middle East. New publishing houses, newspapers, journals sprang up almost daily; intellectual and ideological currents agitating the region at the time came out into the open. If this intellectual effervescence did not really favour a constructive dialogue among all, at the very least a peaceful coexistence, and at times fruitful interaction, prevailed.

However, this glaring affluence did not, and could not last. It rested on too flimsy and fragile a foundation and depended on a specific combination of external factors over which Lebanon had little control. The structural imbalance of the Lebanese economy favoured a highly unequal redistribution of wealth, allowing an increasingly select group of the happy few to grow richer and richer. Structural economic distortions affected the social structure of the country. With the stagnation of agriculture, the rural population thronged to the capital in search of a living which neither the weak industrial sector nor the booming service economy could provide. As a result, many rural migrants ended up in shanty towns, the infamous 'poverty belts' surrounding Beirut. It was the inhabitants of these slums who eventually overran and devastated the capital during the civil war.

Even before the outbreak of the war, the socio-economic flaws started to generate growing tensions. However, the Lebanese political system did not favour the adoption of effective and necessary amendments. Based on a compromise among post-independence notables more preoccupied with the need to preserve their dominant position than with promoting the common good, and on a division of power among the main religious communities of the country, all of which allocated political and administrative posts according to sectarian affiliations rather than competence, the political system was a recipe for disaster. Its inefficiency, patronage and clientelism, political segmentation and endless bargaining among politicians, resulted in shallow makeshift arrangements or, more often than not, stagnation and stalemate. The delicate balance on which the stability of the system depended was sustained by the deliberate avoidance of political debate and consensus while, in reality, the country on the eve of the war was plagued by substantial problems, most notably socio-economic problems, the need for political reform and foreign policy issues.

The system was originally designed to allow a fair and equitable representation of all religious communities, especially the minorities. Its founding fathers had envisaged such a formula rallying the support of all communities for the nascent state; with the passage of time, as solid political institutions took root and as the various sects intermixed and blended into a unified nation, basic distinctions among Lebanon's inhabitants would fade away and the communitarian system fall into disuse. However, the political class, whose vested interests were better served by the perpetuation of the communitarian system, stalled such an evolution. Instead, political communitarianism solidified and helped to intensify the fragmentation of society, its marginalisation and alienation from the political process. Indeed, the system was predicated on a consensus among communal leaders that supposedly denoted the consent of the communities under their control. The Lebanese populations were hence denied direct access to the elitist decision-making process, confined to their original communal communities and deterred from mobilising along different political and social lines.

The Lebanese politicians' lack of concern for socio-economic and political reform was matched by a superb insouciance with regard to

mounting regional tensions. 'Lebanon's strength,' it was then believed, 'lay in its very weakness,' and the latter forestalled its resolute involvement in regional affairs and commitment to the Arab-Israeli conflict. But isolation was untenable and the country's weakness proved to be its undoing: it eventually opened the way to its transformation into the main battlefield of the Arab-Israeli conflict. The Palestinians were the first to take advantage of the situation and, following their expulsion from Jordan in 1970, started to launch cross-border operations against Israel, triggering retaliatory raids on targets within Lebanese territory. Lebanon was dragged into an undeclared war against Israel, which exacerbated its own internal contradictions and contributed to the outbreak of a much more serious war which wrecked Lebanon for close to 15 years.

Lebanon's war started in 1975. At the outset, it revolved around two main issues: the reform of the socio-political system and the Palestinian presence.

Accordingly, two main camps emerged: the 'Christian-conservative' camp, which sought to preserve a political system that had ensured its ascendancy and to curtail the armed Palestinian presence, and the 'Islamic-progressive' camp, a motley coalition of traditional Islamic leaders and leftist parties which aimed at reforming the political system to reflect their own, divergent interests. While the traditional Islamic politicians strove to maintain the communitarian setting and to improve their own role within the system in line with the increasing demographic importance of Muslim communities, the leftist parties aimed at a more radical economic, social and political reform that would do away with a communitarian system that blocked any such progress. Both sides within the 'Islamic-progessive' camp agreed, however, on one thing: in return for their support for the Palestinian Resistance, they expected the Palestinians to advance their own local cause.

With the collapse of the Lebanese state and army in 1976, the war slipped out of the control of all sides. The initial local rationale for the war – the reform of the political system and the determination of Lebanon's foreign policy – was swiftly submerged by much higher stakes. Although Lebanese parties pursed their petty wars – which now involved new and varied actors, constant shifts in alliances and, as the war dragged on, the disintegration of all coalitions and a pointless war of all against all – they actually became mere pawns in the hands of more powerful

regional and international parties. The latter included most notably the PLO, Syria, Israel, the United States and the Soviet Union. While the PLO was neutralised in 1982, and the US and the USSR contented themselves with remote supervisory roles, Syria and Israel increasingly held sway. Lebanon emerged as the proxy battlefield where they faced each other in a subtly choreographed rivalry that stopped short of direct confrontation. At the same time, to perpetuate its presence in Lebanon, Syria strove to manipulate intra-Lebanese divisions to its own advantage, supporting in turn the Christians, the Druse and the Shiites, and eventually succeeding in imposing its supremacy over all.

As a result, when the war ended in 1989 with the signing of the Taif Agreement, the Lebanese were the prime losers. Their country was devastated, all parties were exhausted but none could claim to have prevailed. The Christians had, it seemed, lost most: their ascendancy within the system was curtailed, their leadership was annihilated and they were more divided and bewildered than ever before. However, the victory of the Muslim parties was as elusive. Although they gained on paper a larger share of power and a bigger say politically, they were not allowed to exploit their newly gained prerogatives; these were largely usurped by Syria. Indeed, the architects of the Taif Agreement, in acknowledgement of Syria's strategic, political and economic interests in Lebanon, endorsed, on a temporary basis, the continued military Syrian presence with a view to helping the Lebanese government disarm the militias and establish its authority.

Following the Gulf War in 1990, and the launching of the Palestinian-Israeli peace process in 1991, with the tacit agreement of the Arab states, the United States and other western powers which sought to reward it for rallying the pro-western coalition and for joining the peace negotiations, Syria secured a free hand in Lebanon and twisted most of the terms of the Taif agreement in its favour. Syria alone emerged as the uncontested winner of the Lebanese war and the main power broker in Lebanon, controlling all political appointments, together with local, foreign and defence policy decisions.

Syria's ascendancy was again reinforced with the withdrawal of the Israeli forces from Lebanon in May this year. Paradoxically however, Syria's victory could prove less rewarding and more problematic than seems. Indeed, Israel's withdrawal has deprived Syria of its main leverage in coercing Israel into the surrender of the entire Golan Heights: namely,

Hizbullah's implacable war against Israeli forces in south Lebanon. Moreover, Syria's recent victory, followed by the death of its uncontested leader, Hafez Assad, compels its new leadership to reassess its role in Lebanon in the light of Israel's recent pull-out and of growing rumblings of discontent in Lebanon against Syria's heavy-handed control. Although Syria does not seem ready to reciprocate the Israeli pull-out or to give up its influence there, and although the Lebanese, divided and overpowered, do not yet seem ready to claim back their country and take their fate into their hands, a new phase in Lebanese-Syrian relations is about to begin. It will take time and may not happen before a comprehensive settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict, but for better or for worse, things are about to change.

As for Lebanon, recent developments have led many to expect the end of all its woes. Such expectations are misplaced. Although the emerging regional order seems to favour a more assertive role for Lebanon, its future will mostly depend on the Lebanese themselves. Ten years after their civil war, it is time they grappled with the political, economic and social problems besetting the country. Continuing to ignore them in the hope they will go away is no solution. ❑

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Sharing power

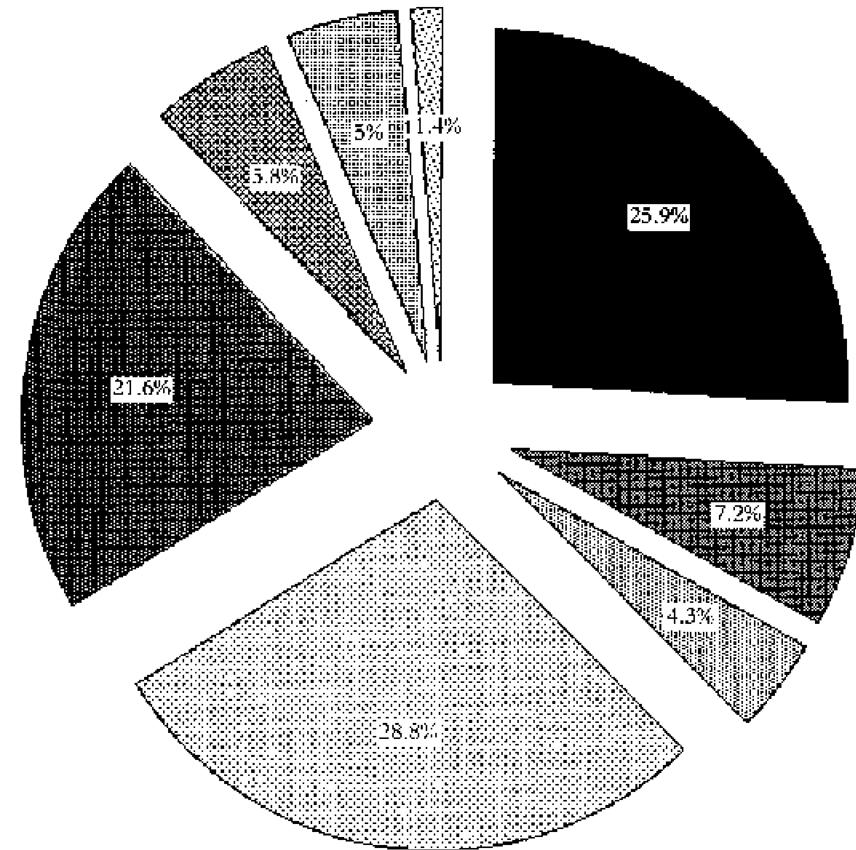
There have been numerous attempts over the years to find a satisfactory formula for power-sharing in Lebanon. None have so far proved enduring and early efforts have been rendered redundant by changes in the country's demographic balance that has shifted in favour of the Muslims.

Post-independence

Since the adoption of the 1926 Constitution, the Lebanese political system has been based on a power-sharing formula providing, 'as a provisional measure', for a proportional and 'equitable' representation of the various religious sects in public office. The informal and unwritten National Pact of 1943 refined this formula and fixed the ratios for each group: in the Chamber of Deputies, parliamentary seats were proportionally assigned according to a 6:5 ratio in favour of the Christians; in government and civil service, the ratio was 50:50, an equal division between Christians and Muslims; the three main communities were allotted the highest posts with the president a Maronite, the prime minister a Sunni Muslim, the speaker of parliament a Shia.

Post-war

At the end of the war, the power-sharing formula was amended in line with the stipulations of the Taif agreement, elaborated by the Lebanese deputies in 1989, under the supervision of Syria, Saudi Arabia, Algeria and Morocco. The terms of the Taif agreements were embedded in a new Constitution in 1990. The new formula: confirmed the proportional distribution of seats in parliament and the public offices, once more on a 'provisional basis', pending the final abolition of political communitarianism; altered the 6:5 ratio in parliament to a 50:50 one; confirmed the former allotment of the most senior posts among the main three communities, but redistributed power within the executive authority by curtailing the supremacy of the Maronite and transferring most of his prerogatives to the Council of Ministers acting as a collegiate body. ❑



Lebanon: Population

- Maronite (Christian) 25.9%
- Orthodox (Christian) 7.2%
- Greek Catholic (Christian) 4.3%
- Shi'ite (Muslim) 28.8%
- Sunni (Muslim) 21.6%
- Druze (Muslim) 5.8%
- Armenian (Christian: Catholics, Protestants, Orthodox) 5%
- Other Christian (RC, Protestant, Nestorian, Chaldean, Coptic) 1.4%

(These figures do not include non-Lebanese groups living in Lebanon including: Palestinians (325,000 – Muslim & Christian – tend to identify through nationality not religion), Syrians & Kurds (100,000 – Muslim & Christian – Alawite, Sunnite, Orthodox, Catholic)

Source: *Lebanon: A Conflict of Minorities* Minority Rights Group © 1996