

# MERIA

## Is There Still A Lebanon? +

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*Lebanon has been a hard country to understand since the outbreak of its fifteen-year conflict in 1975. Was that a civil war or an international one? Who were the protagonists, the Left and Right, the Christians and Muslims, or some other parties? The debate continues today. Is it the case, as the National Geographic puts it, that "Peace and a drive to prosper now unite many former foes in efforts to rebuild" the country?(1) Or are the former foes quiescent because they are repressed? Is Lebanon a fully functioning government, as the State Department holds, or "the world's only remaining satellite state," as Representative Benjamin Gilman (Republican of New York) puts it?(2)*

To understand the nuances of today's Lebanon means looking critically at several key issues, including the Syrian occupation, civil society, and the religious communities. From this we can draw conclusions about the future and about U.S. policy.

### SYRIAN OCCUPATION

The Syrians entered Lebanon militarily in 1976 and have not yet left. Their close to 40,000 regular soldiers along with a larger, unspecified number of intelligence operatives allow little argument on the question of Lebanon's status: it is today not just an occupied country but the unique satellite state in the entire world, or (in the lexicon of the cold war), the only remaining captive nation. Like Poland or the Baltic republics until a few years ago, Lebanon is a small country dominated by a larger totalitarian neighbor. Its subjugation far exceeds the scope of any legitimate interests the larger state may have in the smaller one. Borrowing a term from the related lexicon of Russian geopolitics, it is within Syria's "near abroad."

This situation persists despite repeated promises that it would come to an

end. In particular, eight years have elapsed since the U.S.-brokered and Saudi-sponsored Ta'if agreement of November 1989, requiring Syrian troops to redeploy out of Beirut to the Bekaa Valley as a prelude to eventually exiting Lebanon altogether; yet they remain. The visible demarcation lines separating the warring factions have metamorphosed into the invisible lines pitting Lebanon's beleaguered civil society against the forces of the two foreign occupations, those of Syria and Israel.

Mention of Israel's occupation necessarily raises the question of its culpability: how does its presence compare to that of Syria? Israel's occupation of an area in the south -- solidified following its 1982 invasion of the country -- has deleterious effects on the local population (which has been identified with Israel), not the least of which involves its fear of an impending cycle of vendettas and counter-reprisals once the inevitable departure of Israeli forces from the region takes place and absent the arrival of a substitute multinational peacekeeping force. That said, three main differences characterize the Syrian and Israeli presences in Lebanon:

-- Territory: Israeli forces occupy roughly 10 percent of Lebanese territory; the Syrian government effectively controls the remaining 90 percent.

-- Politics: The Israeli government exercises no control over the Beirut government while Syrian leaders effectively dictate its policies and actions.

-- Goals: The Israelis have been hurting for years from casualties suffered in their low-intensity war with the Islamists of Hizbullah and Israeli leaders of all points of view officially and repeatedly state they have no intention of remaining in Lebanon but wish to withdraw from every square centimeter of Lebanese soil (in return for security guarantees and a full-fledged peace treaty). No such statements about withdrawal have ever emanated from the Syrian side. On the contrary, Damascus has made innumerable claims to Lebanon and uses such terms as "brotherly" relations between two "statelets" (qutran, to use the Ba`thist lexicon).

These differences mean that any talk of foreign occupation of Lebanon refers principally to the Syrian occupation.

The Syrian occupation goes beyond mere military occupation and includes far-reaching efforts to reshape Lebanese life. Damascus has imposed many bilateral treaties on Beirut since the early 1990s, covering every facet of political, social, and economic life. It has maintained a tight control on the Beirut government and remodeled Lebanese political life to mirror Syrian norms. It has intimidated Lebanon's traditionally free media and engaged in the widespread violations of human rights. Members of Syria's (and Lebanon's) ruling elites have exploited Lebanon's ailing free enterprise economy to reap windfall profits at the expense of the welfare of ordinary Lebanese citizens.

One particularly disturbing feature of Syrianization is the presence inside Lebanon of over one million Syrian workers engaged in construction jobs, vegetable vending,

selling peacock and ostrich feathers to motorists stranded in Beirut traffic, and other menial employments. This huge Syrian work force (roughly equivalent to one-third of the Lebanese population) sends some \$10-12 million in hard currency out of the country every day. More alarming is the prospect that many Syrians will remain in the country, legally or not, marry Lebanese, settle in, and perhaps invite other members of their families in Syria to cross the porous border to join them. These workers strain Lebanon's already precarious demographic balance, they introduce a neo-colonial dimension to Syrian hegemony over Lebanon, and may contribute to the Syrian grip through intelligence efforts.

Syrian-occupied Lebanon, for all the hype and hoopla about economic reconstruction, does not present a pretty picture. The unfolding legacy of Syria's hegemony over Lebanon consists of political meddling, demographic intrusions, economic impoverishment, and the steady erosion of basic civil rights and freedoms.

Those who excuse the Syrian occupation argue that Hafiz al-Asad's troops insure Lebanon's peace: take them away and the former foes will again fight each other. But this is no longer the case, due to a combination of war-weariness, a propensity to patch up differences (even if superficially), and a growing realization of the economic benefits to be reaped from peaceful coexistence. In addition, the armed Palestinian factor is gone, eliminating a major external cause of unrest.

Further, whatever their differences in the past, most Lebanese today seem to agree on one thing: the need to get rid of the Syrian occupation force. If the majority of Lebanese would like to see the Syrians depart, Christians tend to be more vocal about their feelings than Muslims, though not always: symptomatic of this general spirit, clashes erupted in mid-1997 between Lebanese of all religious persuasions (but

predominantly Muslim) and Syrians attending soccer matches in Beirut. If pressured to leave, the Syrians might attempt to foment factional and communal unrest in Lebanon to justify the continued need for their military presence there, but such efforts would be quickly recognized for what they were.

### **CHRISTIANS AND LEBANESE CIVIL SOCIETY**

The freest Christian community in the Middle East kept Lebanon open to more than Western commodities and technical know-how; it also accessed the deepest values in Western tradition. It built up the country's free institutions in the economic and political realms. It bestowed on Beirut the freest press in the Arab world, a liberal atmosphere of free inquiry in its private universities, and a political system in which the leaders actually retired.

Were it not for the presence in the city, and in Lebanon as a whole, of a vibrant, creative, and relatively secure indigenous Christian community, with its tarnished but real record of freedom, Beirut would be indistinguishable from its sullen and drab sister metropolises throughout the Arab and Islamic east. With Lebanon's Christians free, the country's pluralist character has demonstrated its ability to spawn cultural creativity of a highly varied and novel sort -- in art, poetry, literature, music, architecture, entertainment, and more. Clearly, Lebanon minus its free Christians would quickly turn into a monochromatic version of Syria.

Muslims in Lebanon generally like the free and open Beirut they have come to know. On the whole, they do not wish to replace it with a version of Tehran or Kabul, though they often do lose sight of the fact that the city they so cherish is contingent on a continued free Christian presence.

In Lebanon, as distinct from its Arab neighbors, society has traditionally been stronger and more durable than the state. Lebanon's civil society features active churches and ecclesiastical organizations, a large network of banks and businesses, excellent schools and colleges, a vigorous tradition of publishing, competent hospitals and other medical facilities, a flourishing entertainment and services sector, and many independent unions, associations, and syndicates of students, labor, legal, medical, engineering, and the like. These civil institutions are under a creeping but relentless onslaught, however: Islamization (3) undermines pluralism, Syrianization perpetuates occupation by a totalitarian neighbor, and the continuation of the no-peace/no-war status quo allows these two blights to inflict their slow but relentless damage. This may be the single greatest problem facing Lebanon today.

### **CHRISTIANS AND MUSLIMS**

Lebanese life is predicated on pluralism, but one that profoundly differs from that found in the West. A Western country is premised on an overarching -- and more or less unifying -- world view that can be roughly designated as Judeo-Christian/secular-humanist. Within this context, a wide variety of outlooks can flourish. Even when these divergent outlooks sometimes spawn grotesque results, such as Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany, the world view eventually asserts itself and rectifies the situation.

In contrast, Lebanon lacks any overarching world view and instead features a plurality of antagonistic -- and often clashing -- outlooks, with no single umbrella to bind and hold them. Irreducible fault lines mark the Christian and Muslim outlooks, and these cleavages periodically degenerate into open hostilities that tear apart the very fabric of the Lebanese polity. Lebanon, after

all, is the sum of eighteen or so heterogeneous religious communities -- Maronite and Eastern Orthodox Christians, Sunni and Shi'i Muslims, Druze, and a host of lesser denominations. The usual analogies between Lebanon and Switzerland or Belgium, therefore, do not hold, for these lack the intricacies of the Lebanese politico-religious mosaic.

The religious communities of Lebanon break down into two broad groups, Christian and Muslim. Though roughly in some form of equilibrium, the two have very different sets of fears. The Muslim fears concern socio-political grievances and complaints, often legitimate ones about political underrepresentation and economic underprivilege. Christian fears, by contrast, reach much deeper, even existential proportions, concerning questions of survival, freedom, and dignity. In their pronouncements, Lebanese Christians often articulate their fears in a language that stresses values over expediency: "The freedom and security of the Christians in Lebanon, and their mastery over themselves, their values, and their destiny, do not depend on any demographic consideration or any political orientation."<sup>(4)</sup>

This asymmetry of fears is rooted in demography, historical experience, and ideological orientation. Islam has been the dominant religion, demographically and politically, in the Middle East for most of the past fourteen centuries. Non-Muslims of the region have experienced a relentless shrinkage in their numbers and influence over the centuries, a process very much still underway today, and not just in Lebanon but throughout the region. The historically Christian towns of Nazareth and Bethlehem, for example, now host Muslim majorities; the ancient patriarchate of Constantinople has shriveled into a shell of its former self; and much more. In addition, the remaining Christians have been almost everywhere reduced to a dhimmi, or second-class, status

in their ancestral homelands; only Lebanon's Christians managed to retain a considerable degree of autonomy through the centuries, and even that is now at risk. These circumstances lie behind the deep-seated fears regarding Christian identity and continuity. Such fears need to be adequately addressed if Lebanese pluralism is to work.

Although it came into existence as a sovereign state due to Christian efforts, Lebanon today is undergoing a steady Islamization that applies to the social, political, and cultural domains. This has also involved massive demographic tampering. With one stroke of the pen, in 1994 some 300,000 Muslims -- roughly equivalent to 10 percent of Lebanon's population -- were naturalized. Two-thirds of these were Syrians. Islamization has two prongs, the Sunni and the Shi'i.

On the Sunni side, Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri, a Sunni Muslim and a billionaire, is generally regarded as politically moderate and socially liberal. Despite this, he and his government are catalysts of Islamization in Lebanon. His wide-ranging connections and interests in the Arab and Muslim worlds, particularly in Saudi Arabia, tilt the foreign influence in Lebanon dangerously to one pole. His Syrian-approved policies, including the Naturalization Decree of 1994, advances Islamization. His extensive real estate purchases (either directly or through front companies and third parties) in predominantly Christian areas where cash-strapped residents often have no choice but to sell have the effect of precipitating a gradual physical displacement of the Christian population. His mainly Sunni appointments to upper- and middle-level administrative posts in the government have upset the traditional and delicately calibrated bureaucratic representation among the various Lebanese communities. Finally, he cultivates a deaf ear to the repeated protestations of the Christian opposition,

both inside and outside the present political setup.

On the Shi'i side, an extended period of self-awakening and self-assertion is underway. Beyond this general change, Hizbullah stands out. Not merely another armed militia or an armed resistance to Israel, it is a highly organized and growing movement within Shi'i society that is taking on the trappings of a state within a state, much as the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) did in the 1970s. The parallel is quite striking: PLO leaders then would occasionally speak of Lebanon as the "substitute nation" (*al-watan al-badil*) and Hizbullah leaders proclaim their ultimate objective of creating an Islamic Republic in Lebanon. Although aiming for different goals, both the PLO and Hizbullah view Lebanon as an expendable host to their projects.

## PROSPECTS

Democratization. Democratization in the Arab world has received much attention in the wake of the Kuwait war in 1991.(5) But Western analysts and leaders then realized that greater freedom and real elections could destabilize some of the oil-rich authoritarian regimes in the region, and interest waned. Lebanon, the only Arab state with an enduring democratic experience and an impressive track record on freedom, was somehow neglected during this discussion.(6)

Whenever the concept of democracy is packaged and made ready for export to mixed or non-Western cultures, care must be taken to ensure that the emphasis is placed on precisely those components of the democratic equation that are the weakest (or lacking altogether) in the receiving cultures.(7) Alas, this care is seldom taken. The usual option called for in Lebanon -- deconfessionalizing political life -- is unworkable because it ignores the socio-

communal realities on the ground. For better or worse, religion remains a strong, indeed the leading, indicator of identity on the sub-state level in Lebanon and throughout the Middle East. But in Lebanon, as in the Muslim world as a whole, there is great need to stress minority rights for, reputed Islamic tolerance of non-Muslim minorities notwithstanding, Muslim rule has usually resulted in a reduction of the minorities to a subordinate status often bordering on slavery. The continuing persecution of Egypt's Copts, Sudan's Christians and animists, and the Baha'is in Iran bespeak an old and sordid tale.

Minority rights are crucial if Lebanon is to regain its freedoms. The only political formula that will work for a reconstituted Lebanon is a federal or confederal one: in either case, solid constitutional guarantees for each religious group, regardless of changes in demography.

Homogenization. If Lebanon today has an official ideology, it consists of an emphasis by the state and its many spokesmen on inter-communal dialogue and communal coexistence at any cost, and on the homogenization of Lebanese society. The goal is clear: to create a unified Lebanese state in which heterogeneous components interact peacefully, (and if they don't, to reduce them to their least common denominators by ruthlessly suppressing difference and variety). It may be a laudable intention, but can it be attained by ignoring the qualitative imbalance in the apprehensions of these often glaringly dissimilar groups? Can the forced homogenization of society succeed, for example, in Lebanese education when this means that Arabic must become the universal and mandatory language of instruction, that a single-version high school history textbook prevails, and that similar leveling measures are instituted? Not likely. Rather, these steps compound the inherent disparities by heightening the Christians'

existential forebodings. For Lebanese pluralism to flourish, the onus of continuously reassuring the existentially fearful community (in this case, the Christians) lies on the shoulders of those with fewer existential worries (the Muslims). This is not happening in the shadow of Syria's ongoing occupation of Lebanon.

Peace with Israel. Lebanon's civil society, however embattled, makes it uniquely qualified to engage in a warm peace with Israel when the appropriate time arrives. In addition to having free market economies and containing large non-Muslim populations, the two neighboring countries share the experience of a free socio-political and personal life. Present discouraging appearances aside, much about Lebanese civil society is eager for speedy normalization with Israel in a wide range of areas, particularly the cultural-intellectual.

### **U.S. POLICY ON LEBANON**

Lebanon raises questions for the United States pertaining more to values and rights than to security and interests. This, the central elusive nuance defining Lebanon, is what sets that country apart from its region. Most approaches and proposed solutions to Lebanon's problems have, unfortunately, been skewed in the direction of stability for its own sake and too little in the direction of freedoms. The Ta'if agreement of 1989 that ended the actual fighting is clearly defective on this score and needs to be modified -- or transcended altogether -- to reflect a more balanced synthesis of the two poles of the said calculus. Specifically, Ta'if does not touch upon the crucial asymmetry in the phobias that beset Lebanon's Christians and Muslims; and its references to "Administrative Decentralization" do not go far enough in the direction of a federal political formula for a viable Lebanon.

For many in American policy planning circles, the Lebanon story effectively came to an end in 1990 with the end of fighting. As long as the place is stable and quiet (with the exception, of course, of the mini-war raging in the south), they hardly care who controls it. Such pragmatists counsel that Lebanese today ought not to reverse the clock, but rather to "keep the patient alive until the regional peace momentum picks up again and a vigorously resumed peace process bears fruit. Only then will Lebanese have a realistic chance to reconstitute their country and wiggle out from under the stifling weight of Syrian occupation. The argument has merit; pragmatists can help by providing Lebanon's civil society with whatever sustenance, moral and material, they can spare. This will help assure the interim survival of a sick patient.

In turn, Lebanon has some utility to the United States. It is a strategic piece of real estate; other than Turkey, it contains the Middle East's largest natural fresh water reservoir and the Levant's highest mountain range. It also has political importance, so that the complete retreat of the West from there could well lead to the entrenching of anti-Western forces of hatred and terrorism. Leading American institutions (educational, medical, commercial) once thrived in Lebanon and could do so again. The country has served as a leader of the Arabic-speaking world in the cultural-intellectual domain and the political one in the past and has the potential to do so again.

At a time when dictatorships are on the retreat, however, we can hope for more than a strict accounting of American interests, which admittedly are limited in Lebanon. It must also count that the irreversible departure of freedom from Lebanon would constitute an indictment of America's moral standing in the world. Freedom is the ultimate issue at stake in Lebanon. Doing everything possible (short

of direct military intervention) to bolster Lebanon's struggling civil society can be a low-cost, incremental strategy for the United States if handled by able, committed, and imaginative diplomacy.

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## NOTES

1. Peter Theroux, "Beirut Rising," National Geographic, Sept. 1997, p. 104.
2. U.S. Congress, House, Committee on International Relations, U.S. Policy toward Lebanon, 105th Congress, 1st sess. (1997). This hearing took place on June 25, 1997.
3. By "Islamization," we mean not just the expansion of the Islamic religion but also an increase in Islamic culture, values, and sociological imprint, as well as an increase in the Muslim population through periodic naturalization decrees.
4. "The Lebanon We Want to Build," document issued by the Christian political leaders of the Lebanese Front, December 23, 1980, p. 6.
5. For example, Ghassan Salame, ed., Democracy without Democrats? The Renewal of Politics in the Muslim World (London: I. B. Tauris, 1994); John O. Voll and John L. Esposito, "Islam's Democratic Essence," Middle East Quarterly, Sept. 1994, pp. 3-11; David Garnham and Mark Tessler, eds., Democracy, War, and Peace in the Middle East (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995); and Augustus Richard Norton, ed., Civil Society in the Middle East, 2 vols. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1995-96).

6. For statements by U.S. officials, see Yehudah Mirsky and Matt Ahrens, eds., Democracy in the Middle East: Defining the Challenge (Washington: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 1993), especially Edward Djerejian on pp. 61-62 and President Clinton on pp. 68, 69.

7. For example, the Western press called for a swift end to apartheid in South Africa and insisted on majority rule there, almost heedless of the dangers this might pose to the white minority there. Fortunately, that story had a happy ending thanks mainly to the wise and charismatic figure of Nelson Mandela. In the case of Algeria, however, promoting democracy, then freezing the process in mid-course when a militant Islamist victory seemed assured, had the terrible consequence of plunging that troubled society into the mayhem and bloodshed witnessed today.