The Tragedy of Lebanon: Demise of a Fragmented Country

*Mahmud A. Faksh**

I.

Since the end of World War II, approximately eighty new states have been established. Only two, Pakistan and Cyprus, have undergone the agony of dismemberment when Bangladesh broke off in 1973 and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus was declared in 1983. The world may now be witnessing the possible breakup of yet a third state: Lebanon, whose disintegration has been accelerated since the June 1982 Israeli invasion.

Shortly after the invasion began, Henry Kissinger assessed its consequences for Lebanon's future, concluding, "It is neither desirable nor possible to return to the status quo ante in Lebanon." One possible outcome was that some Syrian and Israeli forces would remain in the northern and southern ends, respectively, and the central government's authority would ostensibly cover the rest of the country.[1] Implicit in the Kissinger diagnosis is the possibility of eventual partition.

Though the gloomy assessment by the "wizard" of U.S. foreign policy should by no means be construed as a portent of an official shift away from the publicly stated U.S. support of "Lebanon's sovereignty and territorial integrity," a shadow was cast on the country's prospects. Subsequent developments have seemed to indicate that Lebanon's demise looms larger than at any time since the beginning of the civil war in 1975-76.

For over a year and a half national fragmentation has proceeded inexorably. What many people once could imagine only with difficulty, they now acknowledge: in reality, Lebanon is facing possible death. The South (35 percent of the land area) is occupied by Israel; the North and the Biqa' (45 percent) are controlled by Syria; Kasrawan (15 percent) is

---

*Senior Research Associate, Islamic and Arabian Development Studies, Duke University.

[1] *The Washington Post*, June 16, 1982, p. 15. This was reiterated by Henry Kissinger on the ABC "Good Morning America," Monday, December 5, 1983.

controlled by the Christian Maronite forces (the Lebanese Front forces)[2], which are not subject to the government's authority. The rest of the country—beleaguered Beirut and environs—was until the February 1984 breakdown under the government's shaky control supported by symbolic U.S., French, Italian, and British units. The Multi-National Force (MNF) was subject to increasing attacks by Muslim leftist factions, as witnessed in the October 23 bombing of the quarters of U.S. Marines and French troops. Thus, instead of keeping peace, the MNF became a partisan force trying to protect itself. The U.S. and French forces in particular seemed to have outlived their usefulness as "peacekeepers." Recurrent fighting in southern Beirut and in the adjacent Chouf mountains, that pitted Christian Maronites and army units against Shi'ite and Druse Muslims constantly threatened the existence of President Amin Gemayel's government and consequently a renewal of the civil war. This situation culminated in February 1984 in the resignation of the Shafiq al-Wazzan's cabinet, the loss of government's control of West Beirut to Muslim-leftist militias, and the imminent collapse of Amin Gemayel's presidency.

The odds now facing Lebanon are so great that the vaunted Lebanese ingenuity is rendered useless and hopes for reconstruction are at the vanishing point. There appears to be no escape from its travail.

II

How has the Lebanese tragedy come this far?

The roots of the Lebanese crisis lie in the foundation and configuration of the "precarious republic." Historically modern independent Lebanon was founded on a tenuous consociation of polycommunal groups with a variety of religious, ethnic and territorial affiliations and identities.[3] It is a polity based on coexistence among disparate communities. The constituent groups lacked the kind of traditional common experiences or

---

[2] Originally, the Lebanese Front was formed in 1976 as a coalition of the four leading Maronite figures: Pierre Gemayel of the Phalange party, former Presidents Camille Chamoun and Suleiman Franjieh, and Father Sharbel Kassis of the Monastic Orders. Then, in a bid for hegemony, the Phalangists moved against Franjieh in 1978, killing his son together with his wife and child and thirty-one of his supporters. Later, in 1980, they killed about 150 followers of Chamoun and forced his son into exile. Consequently, the Phalange has emerged as the dominant Maronite political and military force in the Front.

[3] Originally, Lebanon was created by the enlargement of the predominantly Maronite Mount Lebanon by the French Mandatory's annexation of the four Syrian provinces in 1922. This complicated, among other other things, the demographic (basically sectarian) balance. There are fourteen religious sects and four ethnic groups. See R.D. McLaurin, ed., *The Political Role of Minority Groups in the Middle East* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1979), p. 276, TABLE B.9; Michael C. Hudson, *The Precarious Republic: Political Modernization in Lebanon*, (New York: Random House, 1968); and Kamal S. Saliba, *The Modern Hisotry of Lebanon* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1965). On the concept of "consociational" polity, see Arend Lijphart, "Consociational Democray," *World Politics*, Vol. 21 (January 1969), pp. 207-225.

goals that can transcend older, parochial loyalties—especially those to family, village, tribe, sect, and religion—to capture the overarching loyalty of all people within the state.

Despite its facade of modernity, Lebanon has failed to cohere as a nation. It is a deeply fragmented country with a traditional political culture. The two principal communities, the Christian Maronites and the Sunni Muslims, have divergent cultural and political orientations and goals. Having been an integral part of the centuries-old communal-sectarian life of Mount Lebanon, the Maronites have always identified with their legitimate existence, security, and their own Western-oriented culture within the confines of Lebanon. Conversely, the Sunnis have traditionally identified with the larger Arab-Muslim culture, and are outwardly directed toward a broader or extraterritorial ideology that competes for their loyalties.[4] The conflicting perspectives are submerged in normal times but tend to surface with explosive intensity in crises.

Lebanon's polycommunal sectarian makeup was grafted onto the political and ideological structure of the state by means of the confessional operation.[5] Confessionalism was legitimized on the eve of independence in 1943 in *alMithaq al-Watani* (The National Pact).[6] It was essentially an unwritten gentleman's agreement between the leading Christian Maronite politician of the day, Bishara al-Khoury, and his Sunni Muslim counterpart, Riyad al-Sulh. Basically, it pledged the former not to seek European protection, and the latter not to seek Arab-Muslim affiliation, as previously they had been demanding unity with Syria. The understanding established the principle that if Lebanon is to continue, Christians and Muslims cannot afford to be exclusive in their loyalties. It seeks acceptance by Muslims of Lebanese identity and nationality and by Christians of Lebanon's Arab attribution, to which an acceptable but elusive phrase was found: *"zou wajh Arabi"* (has an Arab

---

[4] The Maronite Christian community of Mount Lebanon did not consider itself a *milla* (a religious group) in the Muslim nation of the Ottoman Empire. Rather, it regarded itself an autonomous, self-governing community within its own territory. See Iliya Harik, *Politics and Change in a Traditional Society: Lebanon 1711-1845* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), chapters 4-6. Also, see Najla W. Atiyah, "The Attitude of Lebanese Sunni Towards the State of Lebanon," Ph.D. dissertation, University of London, 1973; Leila M.T. Meo, *Lebanon: Improbable Nation* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1965); and Saud Joseph and Barbara L.K. Pillsbury, eds., *Muslim-Christian Conflict* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1978).

[5] The polity has uniquely been called "confessional", an expression derivative from the French term for religious sect or denomination. See Ralph E. Crow, "Religious Sectarianism in the Lebanese Political System," *The Journal of Politics*, Vol. 24 (August 1962), pp. 489-520; Albert Hourani, "Lebanon: The Development of a Political System," in *Politics in Lebanon*, edited by Leonard Binder (New York: John Wiley and sons, Inc., 1966), pp. 13-29; and Michael C. Hudson, *The Precarious Republic*, *op. cit.*

[6] For the text, see George Dib, "Selections from Riad Solh's Speech in the Lebanese Assembly (October 7, 1943) Embodying the Main Principles of the Lebanese National Pact," *Middle East Forum*, Vol. 34 (January 1959), pp. 6-7.

face).[7] It is a country with a bifurcated national image: neither wholly Lebanese nor wholly Arab. This established what became a typically Lebanese style: a compromise betwen negatives.

The political structure was also delineated on a confessional basis. It was agreed that the president should be a Christian Maronite; the prime minister, a Sunni Muslim and the president of the chamber of deputies, a Shi'ite Muslim. The principle of fixed proportional sectarian representation as the mechanism of confessionalism applied to all levels of the political system. Posts in the cabinet, civil and diplomatic services, the judiciary, and the military, and seats in parliament were allocated according to the sectarian distribution reported in the 1932 census.[8] That census, which was taken during the French Mandate, helped to establish Christian dominance in the system. However, the influential position of Christian communities, especially the Maronites, is not simply a function of their proclaimed slim majority. It is the outcome of their traditional special relationship with Europe, the autonomous status of Mount Lebanon under Ottoman Turkey, the French mandate policy of favor and support since 1922, when France decided to create *le Grand Liban*, and their generally privileged socioeconomic status.

By and large confessionalism helped to mitigate sectarian competition by providing a form of security for all sects through the fixed proportionality mechanism. Indeed, "the principal function of the Lebanese political system is the management of communal conflict."[9] And here lies the fundamental problem of governance. Much time and energy were expended on managing such conflict at the expense of government action in other vital areas. Moreover, the pervasiveness of confessionalism in the system institutionalized sectrian structures and perpetuated sectarian identifications.[10] As a consequence, it contributed to structural rigidity, immobility, and lack of responsiveness to changing demands and requirements of modern times. Thus, confessionalism was both the *raison d'etre* of the system and an obstacle to development. Further, a confessional stratagem remains operational only so long as there is consensus among the constituent elements. Implicit in such an arrangement is the veto power that any major religious group can exercise under extreme conditions. As long as there is acceptance of the original formula, the arrangement is functional. It follows that inter-elite harmony is essential for the maintenance and

---

[7] *Ibid.*

[8] According to that census Christians had a slight majority over non-Christians. It also established the Catholic Maronites as the country's largest sect followed by Sunni Muslims.

[9] Michael C. Hudson, "The Ethnoreligious Dimension of the Lebanese Civil War," *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 1 (Spring 1978), p. 35.

[10] See Itamar Rabinovich, "Religion and Nationalism in the Middle East: The Case of Lebanon," The Shiloah Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies (Tel Aviv University), Occasional Paper No. 51, February 1977.

continuity of the consociational polity.[11]

For over thirty years, between 1943 and 1975, the Lebanese polity seemed to function satisfactorily, except for a short but difficult period during the 1958 civil war.[12] That crisis was prompted by the heightened response of Muslims to the Nasserist, pan-Arab nationalist appeal that was sweeping the area, which, in turn, aroused the fears of Christians. President Camille Chamoun's call for Western support and intervention deepened the split between the two communities. It was the first serious challenge, but a compromise was reached between the factions based on the essentially Lebanese formula of *"la Ghalib wa la Maghloub"* (no winner and no loser). The National Pact survived, but shaken, coexistence was preserved, though disturbed, and the country went on as the closest approximation of a pluralistic, liberal democracy in the Arab world. Though weak and divided, Lebanon continued to serve the Arab world as a "breathing lung" and a refuge for exiled leaders and suppressed thinkers. It was a forum for all sorts of political beliefs and currents of thought.[13]

The outward success of the Lebanese liberal republic was at a time when Arab politics as a whole was less fractionated, with fewer extremist tendencies. There were still some generally recognized rules in the arena of politics, which, while not strictly adhered to, provided some safety for most competitors. At least one's life and goods were not in imminent danger. And socioeconomic change and modernization were advancing, but not at a pace that threatened the structure. Thus, there was a relatively stable Arab order that helped provide some balance and proportion to conflicting trends and interests in the region.[14]

Ultimately the changing internal and regional conditions caught up with the inherent contradictions, rigidities, and limitations of the confessional liberal republic and helped to undermine it. The widespread corruption of self-seeking politicians with particularist and parochial values and constituencies; the growing power of feudal-like family political leaders (*Zu'ama*; plural of *Za'im*) with commercial and financial wealth and the institutionalization of their function as "quasi-

---

[11] Michael C. Hudson, "The Lebanese Crisis: The Limits of Consociational Democracy," *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol. 5 (Spring-Summer 1976), pp. 109-122.

[12] See Fahim I. Qubain, *Crisis in Lebanon* (Washington, D.C.: The Middle East Institute, 1961).

[13] While I was a student at the American University of Beirut in the early 1960s, I still remember the smell of the freedom in the air upon entering Lebanon from Syria. Let us, Arabs, shed some tears in regret of what we lose through Lebanon's demise for which we are partly responsible.

[14] On the changing nature of Arab politics and political order, see Fouad Ajami, *The Arab Predicament: Arab Political Thought and Practice since 1967* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982); and Malcolm H. Kerr "Rich and Poor in the New Arab Order," *Journal of Arab Affairs*, Vol. 1 (October 1981), pp. 1-26.

autonomous clan leaders;"[15] and the established practice of nepotism as a function of kinship and clan solidarity—all combined to make the system functionally and ethically less responsive and structurally unsuited to modernization and social change of the 1960s and early 1970s. Indeed, "the Lebanese political process consisted mainly of the competition within the elite for relative prestige and material advantage."[16]

New political, ideological, and socioeconomic pressures were increasingly brought to bear on a system grown archaic. The nationalist, socialist, and leftist ideologies that found expression among Lebanon's growing student population and urban masses of migrant laborers, industrial proletariat, and the unemployed seriously threatened the existing order.[17] Their orientations were antithetical to the dominant elitist, quasi-feudal, sectarian structure. Hence progressive groups were almost always shunted aside by the confessional system before they could influence the political process. Nor could they build viable base outside or against a system whose power perimeters are based on communal-sectarian lines. They were kept outside looking in, protesting. Frustrated, they constituted a ready body of recruits for revolutionary action, as demonstrated later by their alliance with the Palestinian movement in Lebanon.[18]

As calls for reforms went unheeded, economic disparities multipled especially in the mid-1970s with the flood of new petro-money and the attendant inflationary pressures. Although Lebanon's economic growth seemed to be impressive up until the civil war, the basic social and economic problems associated with urban migration, poverty, and income maldistribution were a nagging reminder that all was not well.[19] Indeed, the *laissez-faire* ideology of minimal government interference found extreme application in Lebanon, where there was and is considerable inaction in the spheres of social and economic reforms. The government attaches low priority to economic and social benefits for the underprivileged. Even the basic areas of education and medical care rely mostly on privately run institutions for those who can afford them. All this gave rise to a distinct class consciousness among the poorer

---

[15] Michael C. Hudson, *Arab Politics: The Search for Legitimacy* (New Haven: Yale Universit 1979), p. 285.

[16] *Ibid.*, p. 288. Also, see Clyde G. Hess and Herbert L. Bodman, "Confessionalism and Feudality in Lebanese Politics," *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 8 (Winter 1954), pp. 10-26.

[17] See Enver M. Khoury, *The Crisis in the Lebanese System: Confessionalism and Chaos* (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute, 1976); Halim Barakat, *Lebanon in Strife: Student Preludes to the Civil War* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1977); and Malcolm H. Kerr, "Rich and Poor in the New Arab Order," *op. cit.*, p. 12.

[18] See Michael C. Hudson, "The Palestinian Factor in the Lebanese Civil War," *The Middle East Journal*, Vol. 32 (Summer 1978), pp. 261-278.

[19] See Kamal S. Salibi, *Crossroads to Civil War: Lebanon 1958-1976* (Delmar, New York: Caravan Books, 1976); and Joseph Chamie, "The Lebanese Civil War: An Investigation into its Causes," *World Affairs*, Vol. 39 (Winter 1976-77), pp. 171-188.

communities who, excluded from participation, posed a social and political challenge to the system.[20] Because the predominantly Muslim regions of the North, the South, and the Biqa' are generally less affluent than Beirut and Mount Lebanon, and because the poorest quarters of Beirut are largely non-Christian, the poverty lines corresponded generally with sectarian-territorial divisions.[21] Thus, popular economic discontent, especially among the Shi'ites, and religious sentiment were coalescing. This fact helped to exacerbate sectarian cleavages, for the Muslims tended to blame their less-fortunate status on the Christians, who, in turn, saw Muslims as a growing threat to Christian interests and privileges.

Last, the demographic structure of the country has undergone some major shifts from that obtaining in 1932. Population growth, urbanization, urban migration, migrant laborers, and Palestinian refugees (considering only those who acquired Lebanese nationality) have disturbed the former distribution of religious communities. It is now believed that Muslims outnumber Christians, mainly because of a supposed higher birth rate among the former and greater emigration among the latter. Although this has been fairly well accepted for quite some time, the issue of the relative strength of the communities is so politically sensitive that no census has been taken for over a half-century.[22]

The Christians, especially the Maronites, have always sought to protect their established dominance. They have rejected the idea of a new census, contending that it would upset the delicate confessional "balance" of the National Pact. Thus, demands by progressive groups for an end to confessionalism and numerous campaigns by Muslims for a national census have all come to naught. But the fact remains that new demographic realities have strengthened the non-Christian communities' claim for a bigger share of power in line with the principle of proportionality. Put simply, the National Pact does not accord with today's reality; it is dysfunctional under the strains of ongoing

---

[20] Indeed, Imam Mousa al-Sadr's "Movement of the Disinherited," which was launched in Baalbeck in 1974, helped to galvanise the poor Shi'ite community to become a major radical force in Lebanese politics in the 1970s. Following his disappearance in Libya in 1978, the Shi'ites continued to be an effective force dedicated to political and socioeconomic change in Lebanon. On the background and current status of the Shi'it population in Lebanon, see "The Rise of the Shias," *The Economist*, October 1, 1983, p. 28.

[21] Joseph Chamie, "The Lebanese Civil War: ...," *op. cit.*, states that "...the social and economic differentials between the religious groups are unmistakably clear: non-Catholic Christians and Catholics at the top, Druze around the middle, Sunnis near the bottom, and Shi'as at the very bottom." p. 180.

[22] It is estimated that the population has more than doubled in the last 20 years and is now over three million including almost a half-million Palestinians and other aliens. On Lebanon's population distribution, see R.D. McLaurin, *The Political Role of Minority Groups in the Middle East, op. cit.*, p. 276.

modernization and change. Yet the Christian right, led by the Maronites, refuses to adjust to or acquiesce in the new reality by constantly playing on the traditional fears that Christians might become a persecuted religious minority.

Lebanon's structural complexities and socioeconomic and political problems have made the country equally vulnerable to external pressures. Its mosaic configuration and pluralistic politics have led to increased susceptibility to regional power manipulation. Extrinsic factors have worked to divide further the constituent elements and helped to accelerate the collapse of 1975 by overloading a fragile system. In the 1950s and early 1960s, Lebanon became more subject to the neighboring Arab states' political ferment and ideological struggle. These states, "progressive" and "conservative" alike, took advantage of Lebanon's democracy and internal weakness to fight their own "wars" on its soil and to create or support various forms of organizations and militias to pursue their own policies. In the name of Arabism, they penetrated it through and through and complicated its problems. In particular, Nasserism and its anti-Western, pan-Arab nationalist ideology found easy access to the Lebanese scene, engulfing the country in further Arab political fratricide and driving a wedge between its religious communities. The Christian Maronites considered these developments a threat to Lebanon's "special identity," whereas the bulk of the non-Maronite population saw Zionism as the real villain. There was deep division, but as disruptive as it might have been, the division was not fatal because the impact of the perceived external threats remained tolerable, and there was elite agreement to continue working within the system.

Later, with the deepening of anti-Western, anti-Israeli nationalist sentiments in the aftermath of the 1967 defeat, the subsequent growth of the Palestinian nationalist movement in Lebanon, and the increasing immersion of the country in the Arab-Israeli struggle, the severity of the perceived external threat reached crisis proportions, producing divisions so acute and unmanageable that the agreement within the nationally integrated Lebanese elite broke down.[23] A high birth rate and forced emigration from the West Bank after 1967 and from Jordan after 1970 significantly increased the Palestinian refugee population in Lebanon. The Jordanian debacle had a number of results. One was the transfer of Palestinian military leadership and militias to Lebanon. Another consequence was the building of a state within a state with economic and social welfare structures. Thus, Lebanon became the only field of confrontation between Palestinians and Israelis. Other Arab

---

[23] Walid Khalidi, *Conflict and Violence in Lebanon: Confrontation in the Middle East* (Cambridge: Harvard University Center for International Affairs, 1983), chapter 4. Also, see John P. Entelis, "Palestinian Revolutionism in Lebanese Politics: The Christian Response," *The Muslim World*, Vol. 62 (October 1972), pp. 335-351.

countries prevented the Palestinians from independently entering such confrontation. The Christian Maronites considered the Palestinian presence as a major menace to Lebanon's delicate balance of power system and its territorial integrity. They accused the Palestinians of polarizing the country ideologically and undermining its sovereignty. On the other hand, the disaffected Muslim masses, student groups, leftist intellectuals, and political groups identified with the Palestinian nationalist struggle and rallied behind it. Influenced by Palestinian revolutionism, they called for an end to the confessional system along with the pluralist formula. Also, the Arab-Muslim nationalist groups viewed the state's inability to defend itself against repeated Israeli raids as the inevitable outcome of a decadent, weak state structure. The legitimacy of the country's political institutions was further eroded in the eyes of a consequential group.

These developments introduced a potentially destabilizing element to the system's fragile equilibrium and ultimately led to the 1975 war and the ensuing breakdown of the Lebanese polity.

III.

The civil war of 1975-76, the causes of which actually have yet to be resolved, marked the beginning of the disintegration process. The intensity and scope of violence and destruction were such that reconciliation of the parties to it seemed highly unlikely. Also, the long-dormant fanaticism and extremism associated with sectarianism surfaced and thrived. Indeed, religious symbols were all too evident, providing the stimuli for reflexive hatreds. The sectarian fighting not only stood in the way of secular reform but also virtually eliminated the prewar pluralist formula. Spurred by fear of subjugation in an Arab-Muslim mass and demotion in socioeconomic status, the Christian Maronites, led by the *Kata'ib* (the Phalange),[24] responded drastically and even fanatically to the threat of the Palestinian and Muslim-left alliance.[25] The *Kata'ib* departed from its earlier support of the pluralist social arrangement and its commitment to a democratic dialogue for "progressive" reforms, and reverted to its fundamentalist anti-Islamic

---

[24] A right-wing Maronite party that was founded by Pierre Gemayel in the mid-1930s. It has become the dominant Maronite political and paramilitary organization. On the *Kata'ib's* founding and development, see John P. Entelis, *Pluralism and Party Transformation in Lebanon: Al-Kata'ib, 1936-1970* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1974).

[25] One should examine very clearly and objectively whether the Palestinians committed a serious mistake by promoting this alliance. One should also reflect on whether it was possible or advantageous for them (and for Lebanon and the Arab world) if they had kept neutral in the communal conflict, leaving its resolution to the people of Lebanon and considering themselves as guests in that country, their only concern to defend themselves and their cause. What other Arab country would have allowed them such "alliance" with a group of its citizens?

sentiments.[26] Thus, in trying to defend the Maronites' "exclusive" identity, the *Kata'ib's* parochial chauvinism and religious fanaticism carried the conflict to such an extreme that it fanned the flames of partition by advocating a secessionist-separatist all-Maronite enclave.[27] The sectarian violence ultimately produced separate Christian and Muslim cantons, subdividing the society into highly segregated ethnic-communal-religious geographical units. This only intensified sectarian-communal divisions, and further impeded the development of a stable heterogeneous polity.

The Maronites became convinced of the futility of cooperation and coexistence with the Muslims, who had sought repeatedly to undermine the political structure and now were aligned with a foreign intrusive force (the Palestinians) that threatened the country's existence. This was the ultimate "Muslim betrayal," and the Christians could never put up with it. They wanted to follow a separate course that would guarantee them a measure of independence and security. Never again would they expose themselves to Muslim threats.

The collapse of pluralism, with no alternative in sight, and *de facto* cantonization made the state all the more vulnerable to abuse by the autonomous communities. To strengthen their respective positions, the communities were likely to seek outside support, which in turn would exacerbate the divisions and undermine the foundations of the state. Indeed, the two—foreign involvement and strengthening of fratricidal divisions—have become mutually reinforcing and self-serving and could ultimately bring about Lebanon's demise. Subsequent events in Lebanon, commencing with Syrian intervention in 1976 and culminating with Israel's invasion six years later, seem to point in that direction.

Of all the countries and outside actors who openly or tacitly supported one side or the other in the eighteen-month civil war, only Syria became directly involved.[28] In June 1976, it dispatched 30,000 troops to end the fighting and prevent a Palestinian and Muslim-leftist victory. This was done under the pretext of safeguarding the unity and independence of the country. Syria's assumption of the "big brother" role must have been prompted partly by geographical-historical considerations. Prior to its creation in 1922, most of Lebanon had been part of Greater Syria, and hence many Syrians viewed the country as nothing more than an artificial concoction carved out of Syrian territory to favor France's

---

[26] John P. Entelis, "Ethnic Conflict and the Reemergence of Radical Christian Nationalism in Lebanon," *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 2 (Spring 1979), p. 24.

[27] Hudson, "The Lebanese Crisis: ...," *op. cit.*, p. 117. The *Kata'ib* later directed its slogans toward the restitution of the National Pact.

[28] For a detailed account of Syria's involvement, see A.I. Dawisha, *Syria and the Lebanese Crisis* (New York: St. Martins's Press, 1980).

Christian coreligionists there. The separation notwithstanding, the relationship between the two countries had remained exceptionally strong. Indeed, a sizeable number of Lebanese are of Syrian origin and have close ties with their Syrian relatives. Neither country found it necessary to establish a diplomatic mission in the other's capital or to have passports for border crossing. This "special relationship" has helped to reinforce the Syrian image of Lebanon as a Syrian province. In January 1976 Syrian Foreign Minister Abdul Halim Khaddam revealed this attitude when he warned the Maronites of the dangers of partition: "Lebanon was part of Syria before the French Mandate. Syria will recover it the moment a serious partitioning attempt gets underway."[29] Therefore, while Syria posed as the "protector" of Lebanon's integrity, it retained irredentist sentiments that would fuel annexation in the event of Lebanon's collapse or partition.

Other more immediate strategic-security and ideological concerns also entered into Syria's decision to act in 1976. As we have just seen, Syria would be the country most directly affected by events in Lebanon. Its interests, therefore, would be best served by bringing about order and stability in neighboring Lebanon, whereas continued instability would increase the likelihood of partition and attendant dangers to Syria and to the region. Indeed, the fear of possible spillover is real, considering the sectarian-communal-regional mosaic of Syria's population and the religious-minoritarian nature of the regime. Thus, one of Syria's major goals was to insure that neither side in the civil war eliminated the other and upset the equilibrium of forces.[30] The Syrians moved with vigor to check both sides in such a way as to maintain a degree of balance. First, in January 1976, they checked the Maronites, whose calls for partition were increasingly alarming, by sending in units of the Syrian-controlled *al-Sa'iqa* and the Palestinian Liberation Army. Six months later, the Syrian army battled the Palestinian and Muslim-leftist forces, who had gained ascendancy over the Christian-rightist militias.

In the first instance, Syria sought to muzzle the Maronites' demand for a separate Christian entity. Such a mini-state would be an ideological blow to the idea of Arab nationalism and its twin, Arab unity, which are propagated by the Syrian Ba'th party. A Christian state would set in motion centrifugal forces toward further Balkanization along communal, sectarian, and regional lines. Furthermore, such an exclusivist Christian entity would be akin to Israel's Jewish exclusivism, making an alliance between the two all the more possible. This, as well as the prospects of such a state's becoming a magnet for Syrian Christians, as in the case of Israel for Arab Jews, could prove to be detrimental to Syria's security and internal stability.

---

[29] *Facts on File*, January 10, 1976, p. 1.

[30] Walid Khalidi, *Conflict and Violence in Lebanon, op. cit.*, p. 83.

In the second instance, despite Syria's traditional support of the Palestinian resistance movement and its sympathy with Muslim-leftist grievances in general, it could not tolerate a PLO-Muslim-leftist victory over the Christians in Lebanon. Prompted by repeated Israeli and even American warnings, the Syrians fear that such a victory would trigger an Israeli military reaction, either responding to a Christian call for help or using the victory as a pretext to occupy southern Lebanon.[31] In either case, Syria would become strategically more vulnerable. Moreover, the prospect of Lebanon controlled by revolutionary socialist parties, and with a strong Palestinian presence, could hardly be appealing to Syria. The regime had no desire for a neighbor situated to the left of Ba'thist-authoritarian Syria in the political spectrum.[32] Such a state and Iraq to the north could lead to encirclement and Syria's weakening in the region.

Ironically, the Syrian intervention on the side of the Christian-right forces against their former allies appeared to be congruent, for a while at least, with the American and Israeli positions. Because the United States was unable or unwilling to become directly involved, as it had in 1958, it viewed the initiative as a positive step, for it served a principal U.S. policy objective: stemming the tide of radicalism and restoring the balance of forces.[33] The Syrian role was given an Arab cover at a mini-summit conference in Riyadh in October 1976.[34] Overall, Syria was strengthened in Lebanon and, at the same time, gained favor with the United States that would be useful in connection with negotiations on return of the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights and also in ending its diplomatic isolation after the second Sinai disengagement agreement in 1975 and Sadat's peace moves.[35]

Israel looked at the Syrian action almost approvingly. Indeed, Syria's odd alliance with the Christians marked an indirect convergence of the interests of the two countries. In the first year of the civil war, Israel had opposed Syrian activities because they strengthened the Palestinian-leftist alliance against the Christian-right. But Syria's transfer of its support in April 1976 and its operations against the Palestinian-leftist forces coincided with Israel's objectives in Lebanon. Thus, while Syria was helping the Christians openly, Israel was doing so secretly, as witness the razing of the Palestinian refugee camp of Tel Za'tar in the largely Christian area of East Beirut in August 1976. So long as Syria

---

[31] *Events*, October 1, 176, p. 20.

[32] *LeMonde*, April 14, 1976, p. 4.

[33] A.I. Dawisha, "The Impact of External Actors on Syria's Intervention in Lebanon," *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 2 (Fall 1978), p. 28.

[34] It was attended by the leaders of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, and the PLO. It created the Arab Deterrent Force which was predominantly Syrian.

[35] Peter B. Heller, "The Syrian Factor in the Lebanese Civil War," *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 4 (Fall 1980), p. 66.

continued doing the dirty work of controlling the Palestinian-leftist groups, Israel was in no hurry to intervene directly. Moreover, Syria's military involvement sapped its presence on the Golan Heights and had the potential for protracted diversion.[36]

As it turns out, the Syrians are still in the Lebanese morass. From June 1976 until the Israeli invasion of June 1982, Syria was not able to restore political order. It achieved only a tenuous balance among the combatants. De facto partition became consolidated as the Christian regions, swollen by Christian refugees, began to assume an autonomous political character. Meanwhile the secessionist-separatist activities of the Maronites and now their increasingly open cooperation with Israel made Syria wary. The different militia forces gained strength with the increased supply of arms from neighboring Arab states and Israel. Off again, on again fighting between them continued, while the central government's authority and army were steadily weaker and less effective. At the same time, the Palestinians were regaining ground and strength, and became freer to operate in the southern part of Lebanon (Fatah land) against Israel under the watchful eye of Syria. This brought Israeli retaliatory actions that culminated in a limited invasion in May 1978. Israeli forces were soon replaced by the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), except for a narrow strip of territory immediately adjacent to Israel's northern border, which was kept under the control of a Christian Lebanese renegade officer, Major Sa'd Haddad, who served as Israel's client. But neither the United Nations force nor Haddad's militia proved effective in deterring Palestinian attacks on Israel.

By the summer of 1982 permanent peace remained elusive and violence continued. The Palestinians remained in the South, with little hope of a state of their own, and Israel annexed the Golan Heights in 1981, thus dampening Syrian hopes for their return with United States' help. As the prospects of a political settlement looked dimmer, the Christian Maronites became more insistent that Syria withdraw and the Palestinians find shelter elsewhere. Their entente with Israel grew stronger, which coupled with Syria's heightened sense of strategic insecurity on the eastern front with Israel—subsequent to neutralization of the southern front as a result of the Camp David agreements in 1978—made Syria more entrenched in Lebanon than ever. The Maronites, frustrated by their inability to break the deadlock once and for all, welcomed the Israeli invasion.

IV.

The Israeli invasion of Lebanon in June 1982 accelerated the process of

---

[36] A.I. Dawisha, "The Impact of External Actors on Syria's Intervention in Lebanon," *op. cit.*, pp. 33-34.

disintegration. Initially, Israel's declared aim—"Operation Peace for Galilee"—was to end permanently the Palestinian threat to its northern borders. The PLO forces were to be driven out of Fatah land, and there would be a twenty-five-mile wide security zone in southern Lebanon. But the invaders went on to encircle Beirut and push the Syrians out of the central mountains around the city. Their forces were directly opposite Syria's in the eastern Biqa' region and within twenty miles of Damascus. This threatened direct confrontation between the two with major repercussions.

Israel's military successes and the forced evacuation of PLO and Syrian forces from Beirut enhanced its claim that Lebanon could be rid of foreign control and become independent. This, in turn, would pave the way for a state with enough authority to establish and maintain stability and to sign a peace treaty and normalize relations with Israel. Thus, Israel sought to translate its victories on the battlefield into political advantage by way of influencing developments in Lebanon in its favor. This would entail a major change in the balance of power in the Levant, with consequences for the Arab-Israeli struggle. Lebanon would be removed from the traditional Syrian zone of influence in particular and the Arab system in general and placed in the Israeli sphere with its Western orientation.

Subsequent events have shown that Israel's objectives could not be realized, at least in the present, because they were based on a misunderstanding of the political realities in Lebanon. Nine years of unceasing turmoil within a political structure ill matched to time and place added up to a situation not at all amenable to a "quick fix." Nor was it feasible to impose the will of one group, namely, the Maronites, on all the others, for "in Lebanon no single party or sect could mold the country in its own image."[37] The Israeli adventure in tank diplomacy appeared to be ending up in the same place as the Syrians were finding themselves: a quagmire.[38]

Contrary to Israeli expectations, the invasion led neither to peace with a strong government nor to the evacuation of all foreign troops. In fact, rather than helping along a solution, the Israeli presence exacerbated the Lebanese situation. Lebanon today is closer to disintegration and dismemberment than ever. Internally, the Israeli factor deepened the cleavages between the Muslim and Christian communities. By siding with Israel in hope of ridding the country of all "foreigners" and of gaining the upper hand in the struggle for power among the contending factions, the Christians further alienated the Muslims. Muslims saw in

---

[37] "Politics in Lebanon: Religiously Seeking Peace," *Arabia: The Islamic World Review* (London), November 1983, p. 8.

[38] On the Israeli invasion and its aftermath, see Jonathan C. Randal, *Going all the Way: Christian Warlords, Israeli Adventures, and the War in Lebanon* (New York: The Viking Press, 1983).

the coalition a disheartening barrier in the Arab-Muslim nationalist course. It unmasked the anti-Arab, anti-Muslim face of the Maronites' Phalange leadership which sought to detach Lebanon from its proper Arab milieu and link it with Israel as another outpost of Western imperialism in the region. It also confirmed the long-held Muslim suspicion that the Maronites did not want peace and coexistence on an equal basis but hegemony over others by any means, even alliance with the arch enemy Israel. All this reinforced and intensified the hatred and fears that had separated the two communities for the past nine years.

Israeli policies in Lebanon, especially after the departure of PLO and Syrian forces from Beirut, contributed to increasing Muslim insecurity about the future under a possible Phalangist-Israeli arrangement to establish Maronite dominance. Israel had long been supporting the Christian-right forces in the civil war with weapons, training, and logistics. Former Defense Minister Ariel Sharon in particular took the Phalange forces under his wing and nurtured a close relationship with its commanders (publicly called the Sharonists of Lebanon). Both sides cooperated in the battle of Beirut and the adjacent mountains, with the Phalange units following the trails of the forward Israeli forces. Moreover, Israel helped along the "election" to the presidency of the pro-Israel Phalangist leader Bashir Gemayel. Shortly after his assassination in September 1982, and despite assurances to the contrary, Israel invaded predominantly Muslim West Beirut under the pretext of flushing out remnants of PLO elements and finishing off the resistance of Muslim-leftist, nationalist groups. This paved the way for Christian militias to enter parts of West Beirut and massacre Palestinians in the Sabra and Shatilla camps. The atrocities shocked the world and stoked the hatred between the Muslims and Christians in Lebanon.

Similarly, Israel's occupation of the Chouf mountains to the southeast of Beirut in July 1982 brought in the Phalangists. The Druse community, the indigenous majority inhabitants of the region who consider it their special stronghold, resisted the incursions. The area, which hitherto had somehow managed to be a relatively safe area for Christians and Muslims in the midst of the civil war, became engulfed in strife.[39] At first, Israel supported the Phalange. Later, in the wake of public exchanges of accusations over responsibility for the massacre and then the dispute with President Amin Gemayel over Israel's decision to redeploy its forces along the Awali River in the South without a scheduled withdrawal plan, relations with the Phalange cooled. There was also mounting pressure from the Israeli Druse leaders on the Israeli government, and on incoming Defense Minister Moshe Arens, who, contrary to his predecessor's policy of alignment with the Phalange, was

[39] *al-Sharq al-Awsat* (London), July 20, 1983, p. 9.

open to cooperation with the Lebanese Druse as well.[40] Subsequently, Israel supported the Druse and Phalange forces against each other, which brought the charge by the Muslim-nationalists that Israel was pursuing a typically colonialist policy of divide and rule. With the area locked in struggle and with both sides adding to their arsenals, the Israeli withdrawal from the Chouf in early September 1983 touched off a major conflagration.[41]

All this aroused much concern among the Muslim-nationalist forces. Despairing over an uncertain future, they initially rallied behind the seemingly more moderate Phalange leader, Amin Gemayel, who became president after his brother's assassination. His early call for national reconciliation through dialogue and consensus and for coexistence based on power sharing stirred Muslim hopes. But the fissiparous political realities of Lebanon and the machinations of foreign, interventionist forces were sobering. The dismantling of militias and establishing government authority in the areas they controlled, and bringing about foreign troop withdrawals were daunting tasks for a weak government.

The government first sent the Lebanese army into West Beirut to disarm the Muslim-nationalist militias (the Shi'ite Amal, the Sunni Murabitoun, and the Druse Progressive Socialist party) and to establish control. Its vigor, publicity, and commitment there were not matched later when it stationed a show-force in sections of East Beirut without trying to upset the Phalange forces, the biggest, best-trained, and best-financed militia in Lebanon. The Phalange militia had grown stronger organizationally and operationally through its close cooperation with Israel and its better links to the present government of Amin Gemayel than to previous governments. The Muslims charged that the government's action was pro-Christian, and that the army had been used unfairly to establish state authority. Erosion of Muslim trust in the government led to violent clashes with government forces in Muslim sections of Beirut, while the Maronite militias were strengthening their military positions in East Beirut and conducting their own negotiations with Israeli Defense Minister Moshe Arens, who paid an official visit of East Beirut in August 1983.[42]

Following Israel's withdrawal from the Chouf region in early September and the government's attempt to extend its authority there, Druse opposition led to a major outbreak of fighting between the Druse and the Phalange-supported government forces. It was the first time the army took sides in the civil war, evoking the charge that the army was a Maronite instrument and Gemayel more a Phalange leader than a

---

[40] *al-Majalla (London), September 24, 1983, pp. 15-16.*

[41] Israel stayed in the Chouf mountains for a period of fifteen months, only to find it increasingly difficult and more taxing on its power and resources to control.

[42] *al-Sharq al-Awsat* (London), August 19, 1983, p. 2.

Lebanese president. The Druse accused the army of trying to subdue them, as the Israeli army had done, to help actualize the Phalange designs on the area.[43] Soon after the cease-fire in late September, Druse leader Walid Jumblatt announced the formation of an eight-man "civil administration committee" to run the day-to-day affairs of the Chouf region, which further diminished the government's chances for control.[44]

As to bringing about the withdrawal of foreign troops, the government found itself in a bind. On the one hand, the 17 May, 1983 Lebanese-Israeli accord, concluded under U.S. auspices, was followed by a side agreement with the United States which made Israel's withdrawal conditional upon the withdrawal of Syria, a nonsignatory. In so doing, it equated Israel's presence with that of Syria. At the same time, it led to a pledge by the United States not to seek renegotiation of any part of the agreement due to Syrian opposition, thus implying that such a Syrian reaction was expected.[45] In this way, Israel could stay indefinitely in Lebanon while awaiting Syrian withdrawal. Thenceforth, Syria was the "bad guy" and Israel the "good guy." Indeed, the agreement greatly strengthened Israel's political and military position in Lebanon. First, it gave Israel the right to stay as long as Syria refused to pull out. Second, it put Syria in direct conflict with the United States, which would increasingly tend to view Syria's opposition in the context of U.S.-Soviet competition and rivalry in the area. This, in turn, would help buttress Israel's military position in Lebanon as a strategic "balancer" against Syria-USSR designs. Rather than helping to bring about an early departure of foreign troops, the agreement so complicated withdrawal that it was all the more difficult.[46]

On the other hand, the agreement created new divisions among the opposing factions who viewed it differently, which made it an obstacle to national reconciliation and unity. While the Christian-rightist groups supported it, the predominantly Muslim nationalist-leftist groups, with Syrian encouragement, opposed it. The latter accused the government of giving in to U.S.-Israel pressure, and making political, diplomatic, and military concessions to Israel that compromised Lebanon's sovereignty and independence and weakened its links with the Arab world. They also took the government to task for placing enemy forces, Israel's, on an even keel with Syria's. Muslim-nationalist opposition was soon crystalized, with Syrian support, in the National Salvation Front composed of three prominent Lebanese leaders: the Druse leader, Walid Jumblatt; the northern Maronite Christian and former president, Suleiman Franjieh,

---

[43] *Ibid.*, July 20, 1983, p. 9.
[44] *al-Majalla* (London), October 8, 1983, p. 11.
[45] *al-Sharq al-Awsat* (London), August 17, 1983, p. 7.
[46] *The Washington Post*, November 3, 1983, p. 21.

who had lost his son and some of his followers in a power struggle with the Phalange forces in 1978; and the Sunni Muslim leader of Tripoli in the North, former prime minister Rashid Karami. They, along with their associate, Nabil Barri, leader of the Shi'ite Amal militia in southern Beirut, in spite of their religious differences, shared with Syria anti-Phalange feelings and opposition to the Lebanese-Israeli agreement. They demanded that it be dropped as a step toward national reconciliation, and called for Israel's unconditional withdrawal as stipulated in U.N. Security Council Resolutions 508 and 509. Thus, the agreement was an additional source of strain and tension that threatened the fractured republic. It gave Israel a pretext to stay in Lebanon indefinitely, which would lead to *de facto* partition. Indeed, Israel's redeployment of forces to the Awali river in the South might portend its permanent control of southern Lebanon.[47]

V.

The Israeli invasion of Lebanon had an even greater impact on Syria's involvement there. It posed such a threat to Syria's security and position that it precipitated a radical transformation of that country's role: from "arbiter" and "peacemaker" trying to balance the competing factions, to a protagonist in a power struggle with Israel, seeking to fend off threats and protect its interests. Hence, Syria's presence in Lebanon became more a response to security needs than an effort to safeguard certain Lebanese national objectives. Consequently, military and strategic considerations were the ruling factors in Syria's decision to stay in Lebanon, making the issue of withdrawal more a function of Syrian strategic defense than a Lebanese national requirement.

Thus, since the Israeli invasion Syria's plans and objectives in Lebanon have been based primarily on military strategy. On that basis it strengthened its forces there, coordinated its military and political relationships with the different factions, and sought to streamline the PLO forces in the area under its control, which it considered vital to its defense. Indeed, in an effort to tighten its grip on the PLO, Syria acquiesced in and even supported the rebellion within Fatah's ranks. The split of the biggest PLO force and the challenge to Yasser Arafat's leadership would certainly weaken the PLO and make it more susceptible to Syrian manipulation. Syria was charged with conspiring to finish off what Israel began with the invasion.[48] Although there seemed to be a convergence of interests between Syria and Israel in the matter of the PLO, as had been the case in the summer of 1976, this was

---

[47] *al-Majalla* (London), September 17, 1983, pp. 39-40.

[48] "Syrian-Israel Axis?" *Arabia: The Islamic World Review* (London), September 1983, p. 30.

more a coincidental mutuality of realpolitik than a conspiracy or unwritten understanding. Syria's primary motivation was military security within its perceived critical lines of defense against the Israeli threat.

Lebanon's vital importance to Syria's security coupled with its inherent weakness in self-defense had always been on the mind of Syria's leadership. Therefore, historically, Syria had sought to keep Lebanon in its traditional zone of influence. Or, failing that, Lebanon should be a buffer or neutral zone between Syria and external threats and manipulations. The Israeli occupation seemed to put both aims in jeopardy. The loss of the Golan Heights in 1967 and the removal of Egypt from the Arab front in 1978 perhaps presaged the loss of Lebanon, something Syria had always dreaded. It would greatly increase Syria's vulnerability to Israel and undermine its position as the "hub of the eastern Arab wheel"[49] in the Levant.

The Syrian leadership insisted upon full and unconditional withdrawal of the Israeli "occupation forces" in accordance with U.N. Security Council Resolutions 508 and 509 and pledged to stay in Lebanon until this came about.[50] Accordingly, it rejected the Lebanese-Israeli agreement, calling it an "agreement of submission." It would turn Lebanon into an "Israeli protectorate" that would endanger the security of Syria and that of the Arab world.[51] Moreover, its overall implications were intolerable. It rewarded Israel for wrongdoing and equated Syria's "legitimate" presence with Israel's "illegitimate" force by linking withdrawal of the two. Also, it failed to take into account Syria's security concerns or the Palestinian problem. To the Syrians the agreement was a partial solution that served U.S.-Israeli political and military plans for the area, especially those directed against Syria.[52] It was merely an extension of the Camp David agreements that neutralized Egypt and weakened the Arab front against Israel. This time the new U.S.-Israeli effort was directed toward removing Lebanon from the Arab circle in order to isolate Syria and pressure it into submitting to their plans for the region.[53]

The Syrian leadership believed it was incumbent on them not to allow Lebanon to fall prey to Israel; only Syria's "absolute and firm" opposition could prevent it and bring down the agreement.[54] Ultimately, Syrian determination, which encouraged Lebanese internal opposition, coupled with subsequent developments in Lebanon, which increasingly eroded

---

[49] *Ibid.*
[50] *Al-Thawrah* (Damascus), August 16, 1983, p. 1.
[51] *Ibid.*, p. 3.
[52] *Ibid.*
[53] *Ibid.*, p. 1.
[54] *Ibid., p. 3.*

the central government's authority, seemed to render the agreement useless.

The Syrian decision to stay in Lebanon, risky as it may seem, was based on a realistic assessment of the emergent politico-military situation. First, Damascus must have concluded that its security would be best served by remaining in Lebanon and facing Israel than by withdrawing and becoming exposed to the dangers of the agreement.[55] There is no guarantee, especially in light of Syria's loss of faith in U.S. credibility and its ability to stand by its commitments,[56] that Israel would not use the Lebanese corridor to attack Syria in the future.

Since Israel seemed to have given up hope of establishing a Maronite government that could enforce the agreement and bring about normal ties with Israel, Israel's interest in promoting Maronite objectives in Lebanon, like evicting the Syrians, had diminished considerably. Indeed, there is small likelihood that a strong, united Lebanon would materialize even after Syria's eviction, let alone that it would be under Israel's control, as the case in southern Lebanon. Thus, Israeli Defense Minister Moshe Arens, believes that Israel's mission in Lebanon should not be "concerned" with the problems of the government of Beirut. Rather, its primary objective should be to maintain strict security in South Lebanon.[57] Israel's changing attitude was manifest in its non-involvement in the September 1983 fighting in the Chouf mountains, which tipped the scales in favor of the Syrian-supported Druse forces against the Phalange and army units. Similarly, Israel did not intervene to stop the February 1984 breakdown of the government's control of West Beirut, which put the Gemayel regime in an ever more precarious spot in the face of mounting Muslim-leftist onslaught. Thus, after weathering the initial threats of eviction Syria's position in Lebanon appears to have regained strength.

Second, Syria's presence in Lebanon has enabled it to oppose and even spoil U.S. plans and policies in the region. It was effective in thwarting the U.S.-sponsored Lebanese-Israeli agreement and later in shaking the U.S.-supported government of Amin Gemayel to the point of near collapse. In fact, the tightening of Syrian control of the PLO in the Biqa' and in the North, the creation of the National Salvation Front as a major anti-government coalition, and the ensuing outbreak of fighting in southern Beirut and the surrounding mountains have all been utilized to enhance Syria's position in Lebanon. Following the cease-fire agreement of 26 September 1983, Syria gained a distinct role, as an observer along with Saudi Arabia, in the national reconciliation conference that was convened in Geneva on October 31. There it pursued vigorously a change

---

[55] *Ibid.*

[56] *al-Siyasah* (Kuwait), July 5, 1983, p. 1.

[57] *al-Majalla* (London), September 17, 1983, p. 39.

in the conditions created by the Israeli invasion in June 1982: unconditional Israeli withdrawal, severing the links between the Phalange and Israel, and returning Lebanon to Syrian influence. Later, in the wake of the February victories of Syrian-backed Lebanese nationalist-Muslim forces, Syria has become stronger than ever in influencing Lebanese political developments.

Third, with Soviet support and help, Syria could strengthen its forces at home and in Lebanon, which would give it an added leverage to resist withdrawal and to influence events. Thus, shortly before the September 1983 cease-fire and in response to the U.S. Sixth Fleet presence, Syrian Defense Minister Mustafa Tlas declared that "Syria is not afraid of Israeli or American threats, for we have enough power to protect Lebanon and Syria together."[58] Then in early October it was reported that the Soviet Union was providing Syria with a new generation of surface-to-surface missiles, the SS-21, which had not been deployed outside the Warsaw Pact countries before. With a range of seventy-five miles, the missiles can reach targets in Israel and Lebanon, and offshore, a major upgrading of Soviet-supported Syrian power. The increase in Syria's defense capabilities probably lessens the chances of its withdrawal. One can assume that the stronger its military position is, the more deeply entrenched. This was implicit in Foreign Minister Khaddam's statement to a visiting delegation of Lebanese nationalists prior to Israel's invasion: "Be wise. Have you ever heard of an army withdrawing while it is victorious? Only the defeated army withdraws. If we withdraw, this means we are defeated."[59] The invasion reinforced Syria's determination to stay, and to increase its military strength under the pretext of Israeli threat in Lebanon.

VI.

In the unfolding of the Lebanese tragedy, the combination of protracted communal-religious struggle and involvement of foreign powers seems to portend the demise of the country. The uniqueness of the Lebanese tragedy is that the two forces—the internal and external—are so interconnected and mutually reinforcing as to be hardly distinguishable. Historically, each major religious group has sought foreign support and protection against the domination of the other. The balance between them has served to maintain the existence of the Lebanese state, fragile though it may have been. The Christians have depended upon Western powers including the United States; whereas the Muslims have relied on Muslim-Arab countries. Indeed, even as a

---

[58] *Ibid.*, September 24, 1983, p. 102.
[59] *Ibid.*, p. 103.

country, Lebanon is not an indigenous creation. Rather, it is a French design to preserve the "special" identity and status of Lebanon's Christian community.

Most Lebanese problems are not merely concerns of the Lebanese; they almost always invite foreign participation, which gives external powers a say in Lebanon's future. Hence, it is not easy to separate Lebanese factional struggles from Lebanon's struggle with outsiders. Is the present Lebanese government fighting a civil war or is it trying to stave off foreign intervention forces? In fact, the government is not able to stop foreign meddling, nor are the various groups, who lack national unity and cohesion, willing to forego foreign support.

What makes the current Lebanese situation so ominous and so radically different from what has happened before is that the intensity of sectarian violence since the 1975-1976 civil war and the subsequent Syrian intervention and Israeli invasion have presented the country with the ultimate challenge: survival. Lebanon's very existence is at stake. In particular, foreign intervention seems to have reached a point of diminishing returns. Rather than helping to preserve the various groups in relative balance, thus giving the state a longer lease on life, intervention is likely now to do away with an independent Lebanon along with its pluralism. Lebanon may well sink under the strain of contending forces.

Syria has always sought to guard its traditional historical ties to and security interests in Lebanon by trying to keep it within its zone of influence. Israel, using security of its northern borders as a rationale, wants to control the southern part of Lebanon. Because the two interests are mutually exclusive and because neither country is willing to give up what each considers its vital interest, extricating these forces is extremely difficult. More important, the two protagonist see Lebanon not as an end, but only as a part of a larger context. The Syrian view is based on opposing Israel's declared and undeclared policies in the area, building a consolidated eastern Arab front, and achieving military parity with Israel. The Lebanese-Israeli accord inhibits the realization of these objectives. Not only does it pose a threat to Syria's security and position in Lebanon, but it will also lead to a peace treaty and complete normalization of relations between the two countries. This will peal off another Arab country from confrontation with Israel, leaving Syria in the lurch. The Israeli view considers Lebanon to be an extension of the Camp David agreements in the area, though in a substitute framework, that seem to advance Israel's policy of opening the gates of one more Arab country while keeping its military machine supreme in the area. Therefore, Israel will seek as always to abort any Syrian attempts that could conceivably threaten Israel's established military superiority. For the moment, the two contenders remain diametrically opposed and appear to be wedded for a long confrontation.

Thus, Lebanon's problems are woven into the larger fabric of war and

peace in the Middle East, which could eventuate in partition of the country, for a solution to the Golan Heights and the future of the Palestinians remains elusive. In fact, Israel's annexation of the Golan Heights and its *de facto* incorporation of the West Bank and Gaza, despite ostensible U.S. opposition, seems to have closed the door to a negotiated political settlement. This has led to a related problem: U.S. credibility. The lack of resolve and/or unwillingness to pressure Israel on either issue have exposed a gap between foreign policy pronouncements and *actions*. It is charged that U.S. policy declarations, especially in regard to the basic issues affecting Israel's interests, are not supported by measures to translate them into reality; they are empty assurances designed for Arab consumption. This has helped to push some Arab countries, like Syria, into closer cooperation with the Soviet Union, which is notably pro-Arab.

The Russian factor, rather than facilitating a solution, is inhibitory, for it has plunged the area into super-power rivalry. As a consequence, the United States tends to view the Middle East in confrontational terms. The Reagan administration tends more in this direction than did its predecessor. In the present climate of U.S. relations with both the Soviet Union and Syria, cooperation toward a Golan Heights settlement, let alone a Palestinian settlement, seems very unlikely. Indeed, U.S. strategy is based on denying the Russians a role in the area. The late President Sadat of Egypt was quick to realize this fact and acted accordingly; he saw the futility of waiting for USSR-U.S. cooperation and chose to depend on the United States.[60] But Sadat's embrace of the United States in particular and the West in general was a unique phenomenon and will probably remain so. It is neither politically nor ideologically possible for the present Syrian regime to follow Sadat's path. There are no encouraging signs of U.S. readiness to address Syria's essential concerns in the region either. Indeed, the Reagan peace plan of September 1982 even failed to mention the Golan Heights and excluded Syria from the proposed negotiations on the future of the Palestinians. Lack of reference to Syria in the Reagan proposals could only indicate U.S. neglect of Syria's position and its importance to war and peace in the area, especially since the 1978 Camp David agreement.[61] The present increasing U.S. awareness of Syria's critical role has not led to any significant political moves toward a possible U.S.-Syrian accommodation. Rather, the Reagan administration's assertive and heavy-handed policy has engendered further conflict with Syria which is increasingly looked upon as the main obstacle to U.S. peace efforts.

---

[60] See Mohammad Ibrahim Kamil, *al-Salam al-Da'e* (The Lost Peace) (London: Saudi Research and Marketing Co., 1973), chapters 1-10; and Mahmud A. Faksh, "The Chimera of Peace in the Middle East, "*American-Arab Affairs* (Fall 1982), pp. 26-31.

[61] See Talcott W. Seeley, "The Syrian Golan Heights: An American Call for Action," *Arab Perspectives*, August 1983, pp. 6-11.

Conversely, current Soviet-Syrian relations are such that a growing dependence on the Soviet Union seems more likely.

In light of that circumstance, the United States is not prone to a settlement that would be tantamount to rewarding a friend of the USSR. Although contact between Syria and the United States has been maintained, there are those inside the Reagan administration and out who think of Syria as a tool of the Soviet Union, serving its expansionist designs. Israel tends to encourage this perception in order to widen the existing gulf between the United States and Syria, thus making a rapprochement difficult. The U.S.-Israeli compact of November 29, followed in less than a week by United States strikes on Syrian positions in Lebanon, will most certainly help reinforce Syria's image as the Soviet's "Trojan Horse" which will only complicate further U.S.-Syrian relations. These successive events will in turn confirm Syria's suspicion of U.S.-Israeli intentions and strengthen its determination to oppose them. Indeed, they will have serious political implications for Lebanon and the Middle East, for they make the United States appear more as Israel's ally and less as a "broker" and "peacemaker." This is bound to move Syria deeper into the Soviet orbit, thus making a solution to the area's problems increasingly difficult without Soviet participation. Surely, the Soviet Union is not interested in any peace settlement arranged solely by the United States.

All this seems to indicate that a comprehensive settlement in the Middle East is not any closer. Because Lebanon is now a hostage to the larger dispute, lack of progress on that front seems to constitute a major stumbling block to foreign troop withdrawal. Thus, for over a year and a half now, the U.S.-stated objective of bringing about early withdrawal has been out of reach, and hence the future of Lebanon suggests no cause for optimism. The withdrawal dilemma became amply clear to President Amin Gemayel during his visit to the U.S. in early December. In essence, he was asked to deal with Israel within the framework of the Lebanese-Israeli accord without incurring the wrath of Syria and at the same time reach an agreement with Syria without angering Israel. The two are hardly reconcilable, since neither one seems willing to reconsider its basic position on withdrawal. Therefore, the prospects of success seem remote, and the country will probably remain occupied. Indeed, the deteriorating situation in Beirut and the increasing influence of Syrian-backed forces in Lebanon will give Israel added pretext to stay in the South.

Internal Lebanese conditions do not provide much hope either. It is a country shattered and divided. The groups are still far apart in their political aspirations, with opposing visions of Lebanon and its place in the region. On the one hand, the Christian Maronites still resist losing their political power and socioeconomic privileges in a confessional Lebanon with special relations with the West and newfound ties with Israel. The Muslims, on the other hand, seek to change the status quo and

establish a nationalist Lebanon with power shared equally by all and with closer association with the Arab world but none with Israel. Thus, there is no agreement on the shape of a Lebanon that will succeed the old Lebanon of the National Pact. Accordingly, not much should be expected from the national reconciliation conference.[62] In its first round (October 31-November 4), the conference passed some general declarations affirming Lebanon's independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity. It also called for continued Arab affiliation and identity and an end to Israeli occupation. It made no mention of Syrian forces in Lebanon. But this did not really bring the warring factions any closer to an agreement on substantive issues. Meanwhile, fighting recurs, West Beirut is overcome by anti-government forces, and the coming second round remains uncertain.

Despite its stated objective of assisting Lebanon in finding a solution to its internal problems and establishing peace and unity, the United States is not prepared to involve itself directly in Lebanon's internal politics. "Indeed, there is not all that much the Americans can do to affect the purely-inside Lebanon issue."[63] Neither National Security Advisor Robert C. McFarlane nor the State Department's Middle East experts are able to delineate the conditions required for settlement of Lebanon's crisis. Nor is there a guarantee that a "solution" would be a solution, i.e., acceptable to all parties. Thus, despite U.S. urging to widen his government's base by including opposition leaders, it will not be easy to reconcile the thinking of Phalange leader Pierre Gemayel with that of Druse leader Walid Jumblatt on any issue of import to a united Lebanon. Certainly, Washington does not seem to have the magic needed. Consequently, the U.S. role in Lebanon has become that of crisis—management of critical events in a country where such events are commonplace. Its latest effort has been directed toward averting the possible fall of President Amin Gemayel under mounting Muslim-leftist oppositional pressure supported by Syria. The crisis precipitated a U.S. reaction: naval bombardment of Syrian-backed positions in the central mountains. This action would only make the United States appear more as a partisan on the side of the Christians, thus arousing Muslims' enmity and lessening the chances for national reconciliation.

Both external and internal impediments limit the U.S. options in realizing its objectives in Lebanon, which renders the United States ineffective. Indeed, for the United States to bring about a sovereign Lebanon, it might have to become its occupier. This seems to be out of the question, for it would destroy what is left of Lebanon's independence. Also, it is extremely doubtful if the American public and Congress would

---

[62] *al-Majalla* (London), October 29, 1983, p. 12.
[63] *The Economist*, October 29, 1983, p. 10.

support such involvement.[64] In recent months, as the security situation in Lebanon has steadily deteriorated and as the threat of military involvement has loomed larger, there has been a growing shift in Congressional sentiment away from the Reagan administration policy there. The U.S. could call on Israel for a coordinated effort to impose a settlement,[65] but this would not be acceptable to the majority of Lebanese. Israel is an occupying power and the Muslim majority is opposed to an Israeli role in Lebanon's future. Indeed, such a campaign would lead to the Arab world's condemnation of the United States and put the moderate Arab countries on the defensive against the rising forces of radicals and extremists in the region. Moreover, there is small likelihood that Israel would go along with the United States. Israel now seems more concerned about keeping southern Lebanon under its control and less about promoting the government in Beirut or ending the political struggle among the various factions. Also, Israeli public opinion would probably not approve another full scale military campaign in Lebanon that would involve great human and material costs and could even risk a Soviet response.

The current deadlock in Lebanon has made the situation much worse than it has been at any time since the start of the civil war in 1975. The country is practically divided, for all intents and purposes, and occupied. While at present neither Syria nor Israel wants to incorporate their respective areas, as the situation continues their commitments to increasing their hegemony will grow steadily. The absence of a coherent and viable U.S. foreign policy toward the area's basic problems, the lack of an internal settlement of Lebanon's factional struggle, and a continuation of the status quo between Syria and Israel in Lebanon, as the former is determined to stay put and the latter is in no mood to evict it, the partition of the country will be a *fait accompli*. A Lebanese money changer puts it this way: "We talked about partition in 1975-76 but did not expect it. Now we feel that we have been living it all along,a nd we lie to ourselves if we deny its existence because we do not want it."[66]

---

[64] Appearing on ABC television show "This Week with David Brinkley," Sunday, November 6, 1983, Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger indicated that: "To redress the balance [of power in Lebanon away from Syria and its allies] we would have to put in 15 divisions." He believes "That so far isn't contemplated."

[65] This was first publicly proposed by Henry Kissinger on the ABC program "This Week With David Brinkley," Sunday, October 23, 1983.

[66] *al Sharq al-Awsat* (London), August 17, 1983, p. 7.