

# Negative external intervention and peace in Lebanon

## A question of power?

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The search for peace and stability in Lebanon has consistently been hampered by a lack of positive external support for the implementation of a power-sharing system.

A 'unity of purpose' among those intervening in Lebanon's political process – with a clear intent to support its powersharing arrangements and encourage lasting peaceful coexistence amongst its communities as an interest in and of itself – is key to helping this deeply divided society break free of the same cycle of violence that led it to civil war in 1975.

### Independence

Lebanon remains unconsolidated. The 1943 National Pact – an unwritten powersharing arrangement between its dominant Maronite Christian and Sunni Muslim elites, which helped deliver independence – established the state of Lebanon upon the fault lines of the French mandate system.

Lebanon gained its first constitution in 1926, a document that recognised and institutionalised existing political and cultural divisions, accommodating Lebanon's ethnicised communities by guaranteeing their place in government. But Lebanon was no stranger to consociational arrangements, for its constitution built upon a power sharing system known as the *Règlement Organique*. Agreed in 1861, this governmental framework granted Christian-Druze autonomous rule to Mount Lebanon under the Ottoman system. Therefore, the logic of Lebanon's

National Pact is rooted in Mount Lebanon's long history and culture of power sharing. However, divisions within and between communities over the nature of the state were a consequence of the breakup of the Ottoman Empire and Lebanon's subsequent partition from Syria. To regulate these divisions, the National Pact was premised on the negation of two contradictory national aspirations: Arab Nationalists, who were predominantly Sunni, set aside their desire to be part of a greater Syrian state; Lebanese nationalists, who were predominantly Maronite, set aside their desire for the establishment of a smaller Western-orientated Christian state.

Under the National Pact, which built upon the 1926 constitution, the Maronites held the presidency, the Sunnis the premiership and the Shia the less influential position of parliamentary speaker, with Christians and Muslims represented by a 6:5 ratio in parliament.

The political process that brought about independence was the outcome of external competition for influence in the Middle East during the Second World War. Under pressure from their British allies, the 'Free French' reluctantly fulfilled their mandate commitment to grant Lebanon independence. External competition for influence in Lebanon has since been a defining feature of its politics, increasingly so as Lebanon became strategically important in the Arab-Israeli conflict after 1967, the Cold War, and the post-Cold War struggle for the Middle East – shaped to a large extent by US determination to resist the rise of revolutionary Iran.

## Civil war

The pre-civil war nationalist conflict over the Lebanese state was resolved through the 1989 Taif Agreement, bringing fifteen years of consumptive violence to an end with the principle of power sharing accepted by all confessional groups. Yet Lebanon remains divided today: the US/Saudi-backed 14 March movement composed of Sunni-Maronite factions is allied to the West; whereas the 8 March Shia-Maronite alliance is part of the Iran-Syria-Hezbollah axis.

The National Pact was premised on foreign policy neutrality – Lebanon became a Western-orientated state with an Arab face. This worked well enough when there were no great external pressures placed upon the Lebanese to take sides in the Arab-Israel conflict or the Cold War. Lebanon's 1958 civil war was sparked by President Camille Chamoun's decision to align the state with the West at the height of Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser's pan-Arab movement, which culminated in the short-lived United Arab Republic (UAR) of Egypt and Syria (1958–61). US intervention helped restore the National Pact and Lebanon survived as a state, with President Fouad Chehab negotiating its independence from, and good relations with, the UAR. Nevertheless, this episode exposed Lebanon's susceptibility to destabilising external forces.

Although Lebanon enjoyed a period of economic prosperity in the 1950s and 1960s, its government failed to modernise politically or adjust its powersharing arrangements to meet escalating domestic pressures for constitutional reform. It took an external catalyst, however, to provoke the collapse of the pact and with it the state of Lebanon.

Following the 1967 Arab-Israeli War the presence of Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) fighters in Lebanon exacerbated existing tensions within government. Muslim ministers needed to be seen to support the Palestinian cause in Lebanon. In contrast, Christian leaders did not want the PLO furthering its cause at Lebanon's expense, nor prompting Israeli reprisals against Lebanon.

The 1969 Cairo Agreement, which Nasser brokered between Lebanon and the PLO, sought to regulate the PLO's presence in Lebanon. In truth it marked a significant erosion of Lebanese sovereignty by recognising and legitimising the PLO's powerbase in Beirut. After King Hussein of Jordan expelled Palestinian *fedayeen* in 1970–71, southern Lebanon became the front line in the PLO struggle for Palestine and against Israel, and by the early 1970s the PLO was operating virtually as a 'state within a state'. The Lebanese National Movement (LNM), a coalition of leftist opposition groups, joined forces with the PLO whose presence tested the National Pact to breaking point and civil war broke out in 1975.

## Attempts to end the civil war

The modifications to the 1926 and 1943 power sharing formula that ended Lebanon's civil war in 1989 as part of the Taif Agreement had largely been negotiated by Lebanese elites in 1976, under a Syrian-sponsored peace agreement known as the Constitutional Document. Facing defeat by the PLO-LNM alliance, the Christian leadership invited Syrian military intervention to save themselves and the pre-eminent position that the National Pact guaranteed them. Syrian President Hafez al-Assad fell out with his Soviet backers as US, Israeli and Syrian interests in Lebanon momentarily converged.

US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger saw a Cold War opportunity in Lebanon's collapse. He sought to bring Syria into the Western sphere of influence as the peace process between Egypt and Israel took shape, and at a time when both Israel and Syria wanted to reduce the PLO's influence in Lebanon. The US brokered an informal agreement by which Syria would militarily intervene in Lebanon to prevent a Christian collapse by reigning in the PLO, without provoking an Israeli military response.

Lebanon's Christian and Muslim elites agreed that some of the Maronite president's executive prerogatives would be devolved to the cabinet and parliamentary seats would be allocated equally between Christians and Muslims, ending the existing 6:5 Christian-Muslim ratio. Lebanese Druze leader Kamal Jumblatt rejected the agreement as it provided no opening for him to attain high office, as did leftist, secular and Arab nationalist figures who advocated de-confessionalisation and the establishment of majority rule.

Syria's occupation of Lebanon was internationally legitimised, Kissinger's détente with Assad came to nothing and the war continued. But the US had set a precedent by accepting a Syrian solution to the Lebanon conflict, while Assad had furthered Syria's claim to Lebanon, which he sought to control along with the PLO in the Arab-Israeli conflict.

The next US 'initiative' to end the war was the 17 May 1983 Agreement, a US brokered Lebanese-Israeli accord which President Amin Gemayel felt forced to negotiate in efforts to restore Lebanon's sovereignty and consolidate his government. Israel and Syria would both withdraw to certain positions in Lebanon, and the Lebanese government would normalise relations with Israel.

The previous year, with the support of *Lebanese Forces* militia leader Bachir Gemayel, Israeli Defense Minister Ariel Sharon set in motion plans to militarily remove the PLO from Beirut by invading Lebanon. Israel routed Syrian forces en

route to the capital, which its army subsequently besieged. In August 1982 the PLO was evacuated from Beirut by sea, an operation which was overseen by a multinational peacekeeping force that included US and French contingents. But the alignment between Gemayel and Sharon came unstuck when the former was assassinated the following month. The Soviet Union rearmed Syria, which in turn rearmed Lebanese Druze fighters. A partial Israeli withdrawal exacerbated a Christian-Druze conflict in Lebanon's Chouf region, which forced the US to reconsider its position in Lebanon. The US then abandoned the 17 May Agreement altogether after pro-Iranian Shia militants devastated American and French military barracks outside Beirut in twin suicide bomb attacks.

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In 1984 national dialogue conferences were held in Geneva and Lausanne in efforts to restore peace, and the following year Syria attempted to negotiate a Tripartite Agreement between Christian, Druze and Shia militias, which excluded Gemayel's dysfunctional government. This approach, which was a reversal of the 17 May Agreement, illustrated Assad's restored confidence in Lebanon, but the accord also lacked either internal or external consensus.

### **1989: agreement at Taif**

Towards the end of the Cold War in October 1989, Lebanon's pre-war elites reached a power sharing agreement at Taif in Saudi Arabia, along the lines of the 1976 Constitutional Document. The US and Saudi Arabia sought to 'Arabise' the solution to Lebanon's civil war, and to limit Syria's control over Lebanon. As the only military force capable of ending the war, Assad's position remained that there would be no solution to the conflict that did not first and foremost suit Syrian interests, which were to exercise as much control over Lebanon as possible. Agreement was reached that Lebanon would return to its old system of power sharing government, this time under Syrian control.

Building on the 1926 Constitution and the National Pact, Taif defined Lebanon as an Arab state and legalised Syria's political and military ascendancy. Internally, the Maronite community's power was reduced with executive presidential prerogatives transferred to the council of ministers. Muslim communities gained a greater proportion of parliamentary

seats with equal representation for Christians and Muslims. The Maronite president's role became something of a grand mediator between the executive and the parliament, with the positions of Sunni prime minister and Shia speaker enhanced.

Sections of the agreement dealt with Lebanon's sovereignty and security, which were adopted following Syria's approval. Syria would "assist Lebanon" in the restoration of state sovereignty, re-establishing the state's territorial integrity, disarming its militias and restructuring the army. There was only conditional reference in the agreement as to when Syria would militarily withdraw from Lebanon and, in 1991, the Lebanese government signed a Treaty of Brotherhood, Cooperation and Coordination with Syria, which bound it to political and security cooperation at the highest levels.

### **Post-Taif**

Lebanese negotiators at Taif hoped that the Agreement would mark the beginning of the restoration of sovereignty that their state had lost in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

When Syria joined the anti-Saddam coalition following Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990, providing much needed Arab legitimacy to Western intervention, pressure on President Assad to fully implement the Agreement was turned down – if not off. Following Taif, Syria quickly excluded those parties whose aim, in accepting the agreement, had been the re-establishment of Lebanon's sovereignty. Assad had no intention of allowing Lebanon to return to its pre-war foreign policy ambiguity in the Middle East, regardless of the fact that the departure from this principle had precipitated the collapse of the state. Thus Lebanon did not regain its lost sovereignty in 1989, and the form of power sharing which it experienced until the withdrawal of Syrian troops in 2005 amounted to little more than government by proxy from Damascus.

### **2005: Syrian withdrawal**

After the assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq al-Hariri in 2005, Lebanon experienced the region's first significant popular uprising since the second Palestinian intifada, leading to the withdrawal of Syrian forces. While this marked an end to institutionalised Syrian hegemonic control in Lebanon, it was not long before the 2005 'Cedar Revolution' was reversed. During the Arab Spring six years later, despite the fact that the Syrian government was facing its greatest domestic challenge since the Muslim Brotherhood's 1982 uprising in Hama, a pro-Syrian/Iranian government took office in Lebanon in 2011.

The Hezbollah-Israeli war of 2006 illustrates how stuck Lebanon remains politically, and how deeply divided it

is between the external forces vying for influence in the region. In the fallout from the war, internal conflict erupted with government forces backing down during a bloody clash with Hezbollah in 2008. This led to the Doha Accords, an internationally-brokered conflict regulation mechanism that ended an 18-month stand-off between the 8 March and 14 March factions and re-adjusted Lebanon's power sharing arrangements between the majority and opposition. However, it had come about as a consequence of the Lebanese government's defeat on the streets of Beirut by Hezbollah, who demonstrated that they are prepared to use force to bring about changes to Lebanon's power-sharing system.

### **External interests and Lebanon's future**

So how can Lebanon's history of negative external intervention inform policymakers, and what does it mean for future peacebuilding efforts in this divided society?

Lebanon has rarely experienced external intervention motivated by the restoration of democratic power sharing. More often than not external powers have seen intervention as an opportunity to further selfish strategic interests. In times of crisis, Lebanon's confessional leaders have eagerly harnessed their communities to competing foreign powers.

Fulfilling and building upon the promise of Taif is closely linked to the establishment of a regional accord to promote peaceful coexistence in Lebanon as an interest in and of

itself. There is presently no power capable of imposing this, nor does a regional balance of power exist which might deliver an equilibrium that is beneficial to Lebanon.

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At the time of writing the outcome of events in Syria are uncertain and the escalation of tensions between Israel and Iran remain a constant destabilising variable. Lebanon faces an external environment that is more likely than not to create further instability than support a lasting solution to the divisions that have left it in limbo since 2005.

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