

Whose Lebanon?

A post-war history of people, power and peace initiatives

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Lebanon's civil war is history. It ended before the global proliferation of identity conflicts in the 1990s. It was characterised by its durability (April 1975-December 1990); by its complexity, made up of embedded and overlapping domestic and regional conflicts involving a wealth of actors – local and foreign, state and non-state; and by its high proportion of civilian casualties – victims of snipers, car bombs and rocket attacks as scattered fighting erupted from place to place. Goals and alliances changed apparently at random in response to external manipulation or private interests: 'like in a boxing match', the Lebanese used to say, 'rounds of fighting one after another'.

There have been positive achievements since the end of the war in terms of reconstruction (downtown Beirut), economic growth, routinisation of political life (marked by legislative, presidential and local elections), the return of Internal Security Forces to their task of daily public security, and the progressive redeployment of rehabilitated Lebanese Armed Forces over nearly all the national territory. Public administration is working, tribunals are oversubscribed.

After two decades a new generation has come of age; a generation that did not experience the civil war and which might be supposed, by now, to be living in a reconciled society. Only this is not what Lebanon looks like at present. The country's youth face a difficult future, with many excluded from a bifurcated economy, and their identity torn by competing loyalties. A well-informed analyst (Jo Bahout) even suggests that Lebanon is living in precarious parenthesis 'between two wars'.

After Taif: what went wrong?

The Lebanese are experts at self-denunciation: of inter-communal prejudices, consumerist selfishness and a lack of public responsibility that they know describe their tired, disenchanted and self-destructive society. They can often be heard complaining that wartime with its wealth

of war money and unruly possibilities was better than the grim and hopeless post-war period. Among all the nation's constituencies there is nostalgia for a bygone era of peaceful communal coexistence, security and prosperity – although the same constituencies are as quick to deny responsibility for common losses.

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For the government and the political classes it seems no lessons have been learnt about how and why Lebanon spiralled into war in the 1970s, nor how to prevent recurrence. There is no consensus on the causes of the war: that it was imposed on the Lebanese by external actors – Syria, Israel and to begin with the Palestinians; or that the growing imbalance between a dominant minority and an expanding impoverished majority could not but have sparked domestic reaction and mobilisation of confessional groups. Since the 1989 Taif Agreement, tension between the wealthy few and the rest of the population (of which one third lives under the poverty line) has in fact steadily increased.

Neither is there consensus on solutions and methods for building peace. Peace initiatives to date have been uneven and incomplete. Taif was primarily (although not only) an agreement to end the war and entrust Lebanon's new political order to Syrian hands. The renewal of the confessional power sharing system allowed post-war state elites to consolidate aggravated competition in order to

promote their own confessional constituencies, paralysing long-awaited reforms in public administration and the exercise of justice. External reconstruction assistance from international institutions, Western and Arab countries, or Iranian subsidies to Hezbollah, fuelled splits in the political leadership. These became blatant after Syrian withdrawal in 2005: notably between the opposing 8 March (pro-Syria and Iran) and 14 March (anti-Syria and pro-West) alliances.

During the fifteen years of Syria's 'mandate' over Lebanon, a new political class joined the traditional representatives of powerful families who had dominated the country for decades. Ex-warlords became politicians thanks to an extensive amnesty law, and business leaders privileged under Syrian patronage were able to protect their economic interests through inter-sectarian deals. Preoccupied with their private interests, they neglected the restoration of key infrastructure (distribution of electricity is a striking example, made obvious to visitors by repeated power cuts), and left a bloated public administration plagued with corruption.

Surrendering sovereignty: external ties and influence

Disenchantment within society and state paralysis in Lebanon today takes place in a regional context of dangerous instability.

Lebanon's extreme sensitivity to its environment can be explained by its small size (some 14,800 km²) and the segmentation of its society and political life, as well as by the relative demographic weight of its diaspora: several millions compared with the 4.5 million domestic population. Each party and communal group has traditionally been in search of an external patron since the mid-nineteenth century (with European interventions of 1843 and 1860). They seek protection from without, rather than building resilience from within, but at the same time accuse foreign interests of projecting regional wars onto their territory.

The early 1990s suggested an era of optimism in the Near East. The end of the Lebanese civil war coincided with the liberation of Kuwait and the internationally-sponsored Arab-Israeli Madrid Conference, soon followed by Palestinian-Israeli and Jordanian-Israeli treaties. But stalemate and deterioration were close behind: the region, and especially Lebanon, did not receive the expected 'peace dividend'; bilateral peace negotiations with Israel were placed on hold and Lebanon was struck by two heavy Israeli air attacks in retaliation for Hezbollah operations over the border in 1993 and 1996.

Moreover some 450,000 Palestinian refugees in Lebanon have been both excluded by the Lebanese state and

let down by the failure of the Palestinian Liberation Organisation. In refugee camps after the war, young Palestinians have become increasingly swayed by Islamist rather than nationalist mobilisation, and have played their part in regional Islamist armed and militant movements.

The 2000s witnessed further deterioration. Hezbollah forces – the only Lebanese militia spared demobilisation in 1991, justified through their function as 'resistance' to Israel – received extensive military support from Iran with the aid of Syria. After unilateral withdrawal of Israeli forces in 2000, Hezbollah continued to launch skirmish operations in the border region between Lebanon, Israel and Syria. Marginal territorial disputes along the border (at Chebaa, Kfar-Shuba and Ghajar) provided the pretext for all-out war between Hezbollah and Israel Defense Forces in the summer of 2006, resulting in major civilian casualties and destruction of infrastructure.

In the broader Middle East, Islamist trans-boundary mobilisation, born out of the wars in Afghanistan and Bosnia in the 1990s, assumed an increasingly dangerous tone – through the 9/11 attacks and then the war in Iraq in 2003. In Lebanon, it was not only Palestinian youth but also disenfranchised Lebanese Sunnis from peripheral regions (Akkar, Dinniye) who participated in regional jihad against armed forces in the region seen as pro-western, pro-Israeli and secularist, as well as against Shia groups who were considered impious competitors.

Lebanese towns such as Tripoli and Sidon were the scene of terrorist operations from the late 1990s. In 2007 the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) fought a three-month war to defeat a jihadist stronghold in the refugee camp of Nahr al-Bared. A few years later, the spread of fighting between Syrian and opposition forces in Homs has again stressed the significance of Islamic militant networks whose political agenda runs counter to the logic of a power sharing state.

New Cold Wars and domestic fracture

Lebanon since 2010 has been trapped in a new global Cold War that pits Western states (and their Israeli ally) against 'returned' and new challengers – such as Russia and other emerging powers. In the Middle East specifically a new Arab Cold War (a development from the Arab Cold War of the Nasserist period) oppose states (such as Syria) and forces (such as Hezbollah or Palestinian Hamas) led by Shia Iran, against states (such as Jordan) and forces (such as the Hariri dynasty's Sunni Future Movement in Lebanon) supported by Saudi Arabia.

These fractures together with underlying regional strategic issues reverberate within Lebanon, splitting the political

scene into two camps after Rafiq al-Hariri's assassination in February 2005, and paralysing the government's activities, whether headed by the 8 or 14 March Alliances.

Syrian withdrawal: sovereignty regained?

2005 should have marked a clear improvement in the consolidation of peace in Lebanon and the return of Lebanese sovereignty. Israel had withdrawn to the UN Blue Line in 2000. The Syrian military pulled out of Lebanon in April 2005, and Syrian President Bashar al-Assad made an official commitment to respect Lebanese independence.

But Lebanese political life has never been so calamitous (with more than 18 months of government paralysis in 2006–07 and again in 2010) and sectarian tensions so evident (with Shia-Sunni open battles in Beirut in 2008 and Sunni-Alawite violence in Tripoli in 2009 and 2011). The Syrian 'lid', which had curbed reform after the Taif Agreement, was lifted, but still strife between the two multi-sectarian coalitions has plagued the three subsequent presidencies, has suspended legislative activities and has placed conflict in the heart of the Council of Ministers.

The Doha Accord of May 2008, agreed between rival Lebanese factions to bring an end to 18 months of political stalemate, was a typical example of unconstitutional gerrymandering that underpins Lebanese politics.

Acknowledging its impotence – or the absence of common will – the Lebanese political class turned to Euro-Arab patronage in order to impose a truce, another power sharing 'formula' (two thirds for the majority and a blocking third for the opposition in the government) and an ad hoc, pre-negotiated legislative election in 2009.

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Nevertheless, Doha's precariousness exposes not just the superficiality of peace deals in Lebanon, but also that today's Lebanese political leaders are incapable of taking responsibility for the country and its people, and cannot but act as protégés of foreign powers in a tradition now two centuries old. An impertinent observer might say of Lebanon's leaders, 'Do they really need a state? Do they deserve sovereignty?'