

History of Lebanon Part III

Following the events of September 11th, the perception of the Middle East and the Muslim identity has drastically changed. While Lebanon had been a country defined by their religious diversity in the past, the influx of Palestinian refugees and the outflow of Maronite Christians to the rest of the world had significantly altered the Lebanese identity and its politics. With groups such as Hezbollah aided by the rising of a new Shia power in Iran, the perception of Lebanon had become less and less of one of dysfunctional diversity, but of a new Muslim nation held hostage by Shia radicals. Still, the confessionalist stayed strictly the same between 1990 and the present day, adamantly following the Taif Agreement, with the Syrians acting as mediators and enforcers of such mandates, limiting violence to car bombs and small term assassinations that citizens of Beirut soon grew accustomed to. The future of Lebanon remains uncertain, for a handful of reasons, it remains the most westernized and hopeful nation in terms of its pursuit of a stable democracy, but the problems of 1932 still linger in the voice of Lebanese citizens, who now realize that while confessionalism might be the most comfortable form of government, it is also the most dangerous and volatile.

Right after the drafting of the Taif Agreement, Rene Moawad would be elected as the new president of Lebanon, only to be assassinated seventeen days later and replaced Elias Hrawi, who would last until 1998, watching over a period of stability (140, Mackay (Mirrors)). Throughout this time, the Lebanese would see a resurgence of the past, finding stability once again in the city of Beirut and its resurrection as a tourist attraction and educational hub, with the American School of Lebanon as its focus. Still, “the postwar elite consisted of the warlords and rich entrepreneurs, including the old zuama...[which] paralleled the prewar elite in its determination to block any reform that might result in a diminution of the privileges of those within the circle of power... Thus this new elite nurtured the same seeds of destruction planted by told elite between 1943 and 1975.” (147, Mackay (Mirrors) Still, while these seed sat in growth, the conflict between Israel and Palestine, under new leadership and the intervention of the diplomatic President Clinton, saw a glimmer of hope and a relative drop in violence; it was supposed

to be his legacy to the world. This new found ease in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict also meant that Lebanon would no longer be the battleground for unsettled disputes. Deals with Jordan and the withdrawal of Israelis in the West Bank would give the Palestinians more freedom to move to Jordan or Palestine and not into Lebanon.

The problems for Lebanon in the 1990's were not the Israelis, the Sunnis, or the Christians, but the Shia. Highlighted by the Syrian and Iranian backed Hezbollah, the Shias found new inspiration in an Arab wide movement to revolt and fight for their autonomy. Created in 1982 by a group Muslim Clerics, Hezbollah's first goal was to drive out the Israeli occupation of Lebanon, using extremist ideology and fundamentalist Shiism as their motivating factor.¹ In the same ways that al-Qaeda and Hamas used terrorism in order to tackle foes bigger than they are, Hezbollah stands out as terrorist group, and one of the most violent parties within Lebanon. Following the assassination of Rafik Hariri in 2004 and the subsequent exile of Syria afterwards, Hezbollah would be the biggest opponent to Lebanese unity and the biggest support of Syria occupation. As with other Shia movements, the ultimate goal for Hezbollah in politics is the creation of an Islamic Republic, following a relatively strict code of Islamic laws called Sharia. For the West, the opportunity for Hezbollah to be adequately represent Lebanese interests, or even worse, control Lebanon itself is frightening. In the same way that the United States boycotted Hamas as a political force in Palestine, the true acceptance of Hezbollah in Lebanon would probably result in the addition of a new state into Bush's infamous "Axis of Evil." Still, it represents the evolution of representation within Lebanon. By the 1980's Shias had become the largest single confessional community approximately 1.4 million people, while the Sunni and Maronite communities held approximately 800,000 each. Also, the Shia population had a higher growth rate than both groups combined, meaning that the politics of Lebanon with the dismantling of confessionalist politics can easily go in Hezbollah's favor (13, Hamzeh). There are different viewpoints as to whether this is favorable or beneficial to Lebanese stability and wellbeing, but by the American point of view, the dominance of Hezbollah is unfavorable and unacceptable.

Hezbollah's influence slowly grew and saw its benefits rise through the rise of the Shia population but also through Syria's steady control over Lebanon. Syria had much to

¹ http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4314423.stm

benefit in Lebanon, with over 500,000 Syrian workers working within Lebanon bringing back millions of dollars to Syria, despite only holding 14,000 troops within the region.² After 1976, the Syrians remained in Lebanon as a “police force” in an effort to keep the peace within Lebanon, hoping to alleviate all sorts of cultural trouble that could explode into another civil war. However, on February 14th, 2005, all that was going to change. At approximately 12:55 PM, a beige van filled with explosives erupted next to former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri’s armored Mercedes, ultimately changing the course of Lebanese history. A self-made billionaire, Hariri was chosen to be Prime Minister from 1992 and 1998 and then again from 2000 to 2004 and used his economic background as a means to improve the economy, which saw great results in 92 and 93 but would flounder by 1998, with national debt rising from 2.6 billion dollars to 18 billion dollars with GDP dropping from 8 percent to 2 percent (238 Mackay Mirrors). These failures would fuel claims of allegations of corruptions for years, as people believed Hariri did what was best for personal interests, and not for national ones.³ However, as much as he was, or attempted to be, an economic innovator, Hariri’s terms were defined with his clear opposition of Syrian occupation in Lebanon. The election of Maronite Emile Lahoud in 1998, a Pro-Syrian official, was the reason for Hariri’s resignation, and not as much as the country’s economic failure; Hariri was and still is a very popular man in Lebanon as his children attempt to carry the torch of his father’s legacy; he was successful in 2000 because the citizenry overlooked his many failures.

Hariri’s assassination fueled a nationwide movement of riots and protests against Syrian occupation, who were instantly blamed for the assassination (despite any real evidence)⁴. Many foreign nations would withdraw their ambassadors from Syria, including the United States and France; who saw Hariri as the link between the East and the West. 5 months before, on September 9, 2004, the UN passed Resolution 1559, which called for noninterference by all parties in Lebanese affairs, disarmament of Hezbollah’s militia (which was the only militia left after the Taif Agreement), and withdrawal of all foreign forces from Lebanon. (208, Mackay (Mirrors) National rallies of hundreds of thousands of people would come together after Hariri’s death, putting enough pressure on

² <http://www.csmonitor.com/2005/0307/p07s02-wome.html>

³ http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4264359.stm

⁴ http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4362698.stm

the Syrian government in order to enforce and exercise Resolution 1559. By April 26th, the UN had received word from the Syrian government that all troops were withdrawn.⁵

There are multiple effects. First, and one that's not directly linked to Syria, but more to Hariri's assassination, was the uprising in assassination of political and media leaders within Lebanon, all which would end up on Syria's palate of blame; it got so bad that there was almost an assassination every other week. The result was that there was to be no legitimate president (most of them would just be killed) and Parliament was in disarray, despite being unified for so many years. Second, it meant to resurgence of Hezbollah violence, which was seemingly tame through the 90's in comparison to the 80's and 2000's. But it also saw to the legitimacy of Hezbollah, despite its violent image. Most poor Shia Lebanese began to vote for Hezbollah for party seats because Hezbollah offered a lot of humanitarian aide when the UN and the United States would not. Third and perhaps most important is the fact that there is now external pressure on Lebanon from its neighbors once again, pressures similar to ones that antagonized the civil war. In fact, Lebanon has already seen its fair share of violence, with an Israeli invasion and now in 2008 the violent uprising of Hezbollah. It most definitely begs the question of whether or not the Syrian presence was necessary for peace, despite the fact that Lebanon lost its autonomy in certain senses.

So what does the future hold, and what are the legitimate challenges for Lebanon in the next handful of decades? The problems Lebanon faced throughout its entire history has always been regional, with the likes of the Israeli wars and the Syrian occupation, and it would be hard to solve for stability in Lebanon without a region wide change of policies and ideologies, which doesn't seem to happen. The resurrection of Iran as a regional superpower is even more troubling, especially because of its anti-Israeli rhetoric, and the influence it holds over so many Shias. Still, the better question to ask is: Is confessionalism the only way to resolve Lebanon's differences? With a decrease in the Maronite population, and two distinctly different Muslim groups vying for power, does the shift from confessionalism spell doom for the few Maronites who live and the other minorities such as the Druze? The history of Lebanon has always been one of conflicts and disagreements, and therefore, the interpretation in different sectarian groups of

⁵ <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2005/sc8372.doc.htm>

Lebanese history has always been conflicting, perhaps the source of such volatile discourse in Lebanese politics. “Before the people of Lebanon can hope to develop the degree of social solidarity that can enable them to stand together as a coherent and viable political community, they have to know precisely what they are, and how they relate to the world around them.” (217, Salibi) Yet is it really that simple? How does one remove sectarian individuals, each vying for power, from what they’re comfortable with; what has seemingly supported them for the last 80 years without sacrificing some of their individual rights? More importantly, can different sectarian groups really live together and agree each other without using their cultural and religious differences as their identity? “In a way, communities have become the necessary intermediaries between state and citizens. Public liberties in Lebanon were granted to communities before being secured to citizens...those who do not belong to a specific community do not enjoy civic rights. Religion...governs all aspects of social and public life...even identity cards bear the mention of the citizen’s sectarian affiliation.” (172, Dagher) In fact, there are only two instances in which the Sunni’s and the Christians agreed with each other; when the merchants and the bourgeois of Beirut took control to serve their own purposes; which ultimately ostracized the poor, propelling them into conflict.

There is no right answer to solve the problems of Lebanon, it is by far the most complicated issue in the Middle East, if not the world, and while brief summaries offer insights to its history, there has never been a solution offered in the last 80 years for its resolution. We could be optimistic and say that now, after the recent elections in May of 2008, that there could be a chance for a unified government, or we could be pessimistic and just rule it out for an inevitable disintegration. Whatever the viewpoint, there are a handful of undeniable facts, that Lebanon’s internal politics is and has forever been caught in a paradox, where confessionalism lies as both a most stable and volatile form of government, and that it will always be a field for the Middle East’s proxy wars, whether that be the Syrians, Iranians, Palestinians, or Israelis. Amazingly, the Lebanese always rebound; Beirut has recast itself over and over again to be a jewel in the Middle East and the people forever stay proud of their country, even if their definition of Lebanon is significantly different from their neighbors.