

Lebanon

Whose Country is it Anyway?

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Two decades ago Beirut featured on every news bulletin. The plight of hostages in particular absorbed western statesmen. Then a huge suicide bomb changed the policy of a superpower. Now another bomb has put the country centre stage again, focusing attention on problems abandoned in the early eighties.

In the aftermath of the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafic Hariri, Lebanon is again at the centre of attention. The international community is backing the UN Security Council resolution calling for Syria to withdraw from the country it has controlled for over twenty years. This has also brought France and the United States together despite all their differences over Iraq. The last time this coalition happened over Lebanon was in 1983 when both countries were part of a multinational force there following the Israeli invasion. The object then, as now, was to get Syria out and restore Lebanese sovereignty. Why should it work now if it has not worked before? The long history of western intervention in Lebanon suggests that it can create more problems than it solves.

The 1983 multinational force aimed to remove the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) and strengthen the Lebanese army and state. It would then have signed a separate peace treaty with Israel, known as the May 17 agreement. It would have been the second Arab country to do so after Egypt. There was a hitch when the then Lebanese President Amine Gemayel refused to sign after President Hafez al-Asad of Syria indicated that he and his allies in the country would oppose it.

This whole agenda collapsed after a suicide bomber drove a truck into the US marine barracks near Beirut airport killing

220 soldiers leading to the 'redeployment' of the US forces, followed by French troops who were hit at the same time. The lesson from that episode was that Lebanon could not be separated from Syria; it was too hot to handle. The US had overplayed its hand and burnt its fingers. For Lebanon, this also meant the failure and loss of western protection, more or less a constant feature since independence.

The vacuum created by the collapse of this agenda could then only be filled by Syria, first through the 1989 Taif agreement that ended the Lebanese war and gave it 'special relations' with Lebanon. This was brokered by Rafic Hariri, a courtier of King Fahd of Saudi Arabia and close friend of the then Mayor of Paris, Jacques Chirac.

Syria was ultimately given a free hand in 1990 as recompense for joining the Gulf war coalition to oust Saddam Hussein after his invasion of Kuwait. President Hafez al Asad was the main, if not only, net beneficiary from the Gulf War.

From then on, Lebanon was under Syrian domination and lost its strategic relevance – the Lebanese and Syrian tracks were inseparable. This was all with the blessing of the US President George Bush senior's administration, and in line with the dictum of the former Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger: 'Give Lebanon to Syria and there will be peace in the Middle East'.

Many of the problems that the US abandoned in Lebanon in 1983, came back to haunt it twenty years later. Lebanon was a microcosm of all the conflicts in the area. It was the testing and gestation ground. The continuing occupation of south Lebanon by Israel radicalised the Shi'a population and produced Hizbollah, or the Party of God, the US and Israel are now so keen to get rid of. Hizbollah's successful operations in south Lebanon eventually drove Israel to withdraw and end its 22 year occupation in May 2000, thus also making it the only party to ever defeat the Arabs' powerful enemy. This probably inspired the uprising or Intifada of that year in Palestine which sunk the peace process. The weakening of the PLO ultimately led to the rise of Hamas and Islamic Jihad, again two radical Islamic parties that had stepped in to fill the vacuum. They are now seen as the main hurdle in the peace process.

The marine barracks attack, the first suicide operation in modern times, was successful in changing the policy of the most powerful country in the world and the course of history. It was a precursor to the attacks on the twin towers in New York in September 2001 which also had a radical effect on US policy.

After the US backed out in 1983, Lebanon became the battleground between Iran and the US through the hostage crisis where the US was forced to make deals later known as the Iran-Contra affair.

Syria and the PLO were also battling it out in Lebanon through the war of the camps which ended with Syria controlling ten radical groups opposed to the Oslo peace process and conducting a continuous battle within the refugee camps.

Tensions between Sunnis and Shiis also emerged then in Lebanon with both Saudi Arabia and Iran holding some strings. Other issues such as the debate between secularism and fundamentalism,

nationalism and pan Arabism and pan Islamism were being fought out on the streets of Beirut. The outcomes of these battles were to influence the future of the region as a whole.

Most of the twenty-year-old unresolved issues, came back to haunt US policy makers. UN Security Council resolution 1559, which the US is adamant in applying now, includes this unfinished business: decommissioning Hizbollah, disarming the Palestinian refugee camps and ensuring the withdrawal of Syrian troops and influence.

The departure of the multinational forces in 1983 also marked the collapse of a whole approach to Lebanese security. The three dimensions of this doctrine were a balance between western protection and a pact with the dominant regional power, balanced by other Arab states. This formula allowed the country to remain on the sidelines of the main conflicts of the region. Beirut became its playground as well as its trade and financial centre.

Western protection was established soon after independence and withdrawn with the multinational forces in 1983. It was only re-established last September with US-French collaboration over Security Council resolution 1559. This is supported by the main Arab regional powers like Saudi Arabia and the Gulf countries, the balancing act revisited.

FLYING FIXER

In the meantime, Hariri, who shuttled between Damascus, Paris and Saudi Arabia in the 1980s, was the man behind the scenes fire-fighting a lot of these problems and working on a regional agenda. By providing a link between Syria and Saudi Arabia, he brokered the Taif agreement. At the same time, he was planning the restoration of Beirut as a cosmopolitan regional centre.

He had another team working on reforming the Syrian economy and preparing for liberalisation in view of the

imminent collapse of the Soviet Union. A further group was pushing liberal Islamic ideas opposed to fundamentalism at a time when the Jihadis were being promoted in Afghanistan, and Iran was exporting its revolution to Lebanon. He later became prime minister of Lebanon and represented a regional, mainly Saudi, balancing force to Syrian domination. His collaboration with the Syrian regime was punctuated by continuous crises.

The Paris conference of November 2002, which he convened, saw the restoration of the traditional Lebanese security arrangements on a benign economic front. It brought together, under the patronage of Chirac, now President of France, international and regional powers that put up a large subsidy to help Lebanon pull out of an economic crisis that could have had security implications. After the more recent confrontation with Syria in the middle of last year over the extension of the mandate of President Emile Lahoud, Hariri was believed to have been instrumental, through his friendship with Chirac, in instigating resolution 1559.

The assassination of Hariri ignited a wave of protest in Lebanon against Syria and its dominating security services. This brought down the government of Prime Minister Omar Karami who resigned in response to both the Ukraine style popular protest movement and the opposition's harsh criticism.

We are back at square one. France, the US, together with Saudi Arabia and other regional powers, under the authority of the Security Council resolution, are exerting pressure on Syria to leave Lebanon and restore democracy.

President Bashar al-Asad of Syria has spent the past two years trying to mend fences with Washington. After the fall of Baghdad, he found himself cornered on all sides by pro-US neighbours: Turkey, Iraq, Jordan and Israel. With the assassination of Hariri, he also lost his

closest allies, France and Saudi Arabia. Lebanon, his only card left, is being snatched away too.

Asad has offered Washington concessions on all the issues of common interest. There has been co-operation over Iraq, where he can better control the border and provide intelligence using Syria's extensive contacts with the Iraqi opposition that was based in Damascus before the war.

He is also offering collaboration in the 'war' on terror where he has proved useful in the past few years. Then there is the willingness for an unconditional resumption of peace talks with Israel, in contradiction to his father's line.

Asad has visited Turkey and signed a treaty resolving the conflict over the border province of Antioch. Subsequently Ankara mediated for him both with Israel and the US. He has shown willingness, if not eagerness and enthusiasm, for economic and political reform, by among other things, releasing political prisoners and allowing private media and banks, as well as abolishing Ba'ath party military education in schools.

REGIME CHANGE AGAIN

But it was becoming more and more obvious that the hardliners in Washington were not interested in making a deal with Syria to allow the regime to survive. This is in the belief that, like the former eastern European Soviet satellites, the Syrian regime is unreformable. Asad was under siege on all fronts, the message was the same from both the Arabs and the west. Bush's statements amounted to a demand for a humiliating unconditional withdrawal from Lebanon that could potentially endanger Asad's domestic situation.

There was also no guarantee that even that was going to be enough; it seemed that the Bush administration was going for the kill and would be satisfied with nothing less than the demise of the Ba'ath party and regime in Damascus.

Asad was in the same position as Saddam Hussein was prior to the US invasion of Iraq in March 2003.

PRESSING THE RIGHT BUTTONS

With this in mind Asad made a speech on March 5 indicating Syria's eagerness to resume talks with the US and make a deal. At the same time, he defiantly sent a message both to his allies in Lebanon and to Washington, reminding them of what he described as a forthcoming 'May 17' situation that needs to be confronted. This was a reference to the unsuccessful 1983 attempt to create a separate peace deal between Lebanon and Israel that provoked a u-turn in US policy towards Syria.

He also referred to the dangers of separating the Lebanese and Syrian tracks of peace negotiations and of the final settlement of the issue of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. All of this is powerful rhetoric designed to raise concerns in Lebanon. Hizbollah was warned that its neck was also on the line as resolution 1559 demanded the group's disarmament and dissolution.

All the right buttons were pressed, triggering a split in the Lebanese opposition and a huge demonstration against foreign intervention by Hizbollah and other forces loyal to Syria. Since Asad's speech, armed groups have been on the streets of Beirut in scenes reminiscent of the civil war days. Asad was showing that he can create problems only he can solve and that his control over Lebanon was as useful as the offers he was making regionally.

FAULT LINE

The west again faces a dilemma. Intervention in Lebanon has obvious dangers. Abandoning it a second time is no less problematic and may backfire later. Does it do a deal with Syria that involves leaving it in control of Lebanon in return for concessions on all the other fronts? Or should it push its declared

policy to the logical conclusion with all the risks involved? The events of the two decades ago vividly illustrate the potential pain and pitfalls. The battle for Beirut has resumed.

Lebanon is again on the fault lines of a new, emerging world order; the decisions over it will determine the direction of US policy in the region. Prince Klemens von Metternich, much compared to Kissinger, was a powerful Austrian statesman who helped shape modern Europe and restored his country as a leading nineteenth century power.

Before sending his ambassador to Constantinople at the height of the debacles of the Eastern Question, a period of intense European intervention in the Ottoman Empire, he told him to: 'Tell the Sultan, if there is war in Lebanon there will be war in the Levant; and tell the Sultan if there is peace in Lebanon there will be peace in the Levant'. This advice should be foremost in the minds of US policy makers.

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