



Lebanon Slides Toward the Sectarian Brink Again

Can the Beleaguered Commercial Society Survive?

Doug Bandow

September 21, 2020

More than a month ago Beirut suffered a massive explosion at its port, killing scores of people, wounding thousands, leaving hundreds of thousands homeless, and creating widespread destruction. Reconstruction will cost billions of dollars.

The government did a good job selecting scapegoats but since has achieved little else. The old, discredited cabinet resigned under fire. But the antagonistic factions, responsible for the incompetent sectarian mess that passes for Lebanese politics, have been unable to agree on a new administration.

Unfortunately, Washington has been predictably unhelpful. Looking at the issue, like the rest of the Middle East, through Saudi and Israeli eyes, Washington has focused its fire on Hezbollah. The Shia political movement is a malign force, to be sure, but will not disappear simply because the president fantasizes on turning the region over to his Saudi and Israeli allies. Peacefully ending Hezbollah's role as a state within a state will require a political transformation not yet evident in the long-divided state.

Unsurprisingly, it was European geographic engineering after World War I, by allied powers determined to plunder the lands of the collapsed Ottoman Empire despite Woodrow Wilson's sanctimonious cant about self-determination, that created Lebanon. A protectorate of France, it contained a Christian majority and was known as the Switzerland of the Middle East.

However, religious tensions inflamed by growing Arab nationalism in Egypt and Iraq threatened the country's stability in 1958, causing the Eisenhower administration to send 14,000 troops backed by abundant naval forces to temporarily bolster the government. Alas, the underlying tensions never disappeared, finally erupting in 1975 into civil war, which lasted 15 years and killed some 120,000 people.

In 1982 the Reagan administration, urged on by Israel, intervened to back Lebanon's nominal national government, which was in fact just one of more than a score of warring factions. No one was fooled by American claims that its forces were "peacekeepers," as U.S. naval and air forces bombarded Muslim and Druze fighters and villages.

The *New York Times* ran numerous reports on American combat missions: "US Ships Enter Lebanon Fighting Shelling Hill Site," "US Warships Fire in Direct Support of Lebanese Army,"

"2 US Warships Again Bombard Artillery Batteries Outside Beirut," and "In the Druze Hills, a Burst of Anger is Directed at US" The Rand Corporation's John H. Kelly observed: "In Lebanon it looked very much as if the United States had taken up arms in behalf of the Christians."

By effectively allying with the Phalangists Washington turned American personnel into legitimate targets of war. The devastating bombings of the US embassy and Marine Corps barracks resulted. It took time, but even Reagan came to recognize the magnitude of his mistake. For instance, his September 6, 1983 diary entry observed: "We lost 2 more Marines last night in Beirut. The Civil War is running wild & could result in collapse of the Gemayal govt. & and stuff would hit the fan." On the 11th he wrote: "Our problem is do we expand our mission to aid the army with artillery & air support. This could be seen as putting us in the war."

He came to question the mission. In his diary he recorded: "One father asked if they were in Lebanon for anything that was worth his son's life." The answer evidently was no. The president "redeployed" the Marines aboard naval vessels which soon sailed for home.

Eventually the conflict ended, with international mediation and Syrian intervention. The result was a confessional government that apportioned appointments and resources by religion, including a Christian president, Sunni prime minister, and Shia parliament speaker. For many Lebanese religion is but a cultural and tribal identification, though still key to political power and economic wealth. Predictably the resulting governments enriched favored interests at the public's expense. The World Bank estimated that systemic corruption cost nine percent of the country's GDP.

Competent governance increasingly appears to be impossible. Basic services lag. Trash is not collected. Electricity is not produced.

In 2013 legislators deadlocked over a new election law, causing a five-year delay in parliamentary elections. Starting in 2014 Lebanese lawmakers took 29 months to select a new president, their choice between two Christian warlords from the civil war, one backed by Hezbollah, the other by Saudi Arabia. The former, Michel Aoun, finally won, but the contenders' mutual hostility has not abated; the two political factions recently staged a street face-off punctuated by gunshots.

Bloody chaos in next door Syria proved equally destabilizing. Hezbollah intervened on behalf of the Assad government while 1.5 million refugees fled to Lebanon. Political protests over economic corruption and stasis erupted last October, resulting in the government's resignation and replacement by an equally ineffective cast of officials.

This year the COVID-19 pandemic and US assault on the Syrian economy – with sanctions designed to impoverish the entire population, irrespective of the resulting popular hardship – together wrecked Lebanon's economy, currency, and middle class. The GDP could shrink by a fourth this year, prices have doubled over the past year, the unemployment rate may be as high as 40 percent, the poverty rate is even higher, perhaps 50 percent, and an estimated 75 percent of the population needs outside assistance.

Government finances are a wreck, banks are filled with bad debt, and the financial system needs at least \$100 billion to recapitalize. The International Crisis Group warned: "Crunch time may come when the state, strapped for cash as tax revenue collapses, cannot meet the public-sector payroll or when hyperinflation wipes out the real value of people's incomes. State institutions, including the police, may start to disintegrate, and what have been mainly peaceful protests could turn violent."

In July tensions between Hezbollah and Israel briefly spiked. Then came the port disaster shoving both the economy and government close to the abyss.

Worst of all, worried ICG: "today's dynamics bear an uncanny similarity to those that preceded the civil war." Buildings still evidence damage from the fighting some three decades ago. No one wants a repeat. Which makes the problem of Hezbollah so sensitive. Its weapons, noted journalist Anchal Vohra, are viewed as "necessary protection for the Shiites, traditionally Lebanon's poorest community, both against Israel and in a nation riven with sectarian divisions." Forcibly disarming the group is beyond the military's ability and the attempt would trigger sectarian conflict, perhaps even full-scale civil war.

Into this breach stepped French President Emmanuel Macron, who visited Lebanon after the explosion, promising aid and urging reform. Lebanese bank officials recently met with French officials hoping to design a support package. However, Beirut continues to resist a full outside financial audit of the banking system and government treasury, which would reveal the nature of the crisis as well as magnitude of financial skullduggery that has occurred with official acquiescence if not approval.

Although a new prime minister, Mustapha Adib, has been tapped, the former diplomat has no independent power base or clout to force change. Moreover, the various political factions, responsible for Lebanon's current plight, remain deadlocked over the allocation of cabinet posts, and especially the critical finance ministry, long held by the Amal Movement, a Shia party allied with Hezbollah. Macron argued what should be obvious: ministerial posts "are not an exclusive right for any sect." But this is Lebanon. He was left to fulminate that sectarian interests were undermining "the last chance to save Lebanon and the Lebanese."

Unfortunately, Washington's actions have inflamed tensions. The US Treasury Department has sanctioned Lebanese companies and officials linked to Hezbollah, including a former finance minister, now a top aide to Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri. That action made both Hezbollah and the Shia Amal Movement, which is allied with Hezbollah and headed by Berri, more adamant that Amal retain the Finance ministry.

Hezbollah cited "the extremely negative American role" and stated that the US "is the one responsible for obstructing the efforts to form the government." Secretary of State Mike Pompeo also insisted that France address Hezbollah's military role, without offering any means to do so. The challenge, alas, is not imagining what government would be best in a perfect world but finding the best that can be constructed in the existing world. Washington, it seems, cares not at all about the impact on the Lebanese people.

Ultimately, Lebanon desperately needs more normal politics in which government is not a sectarian spoils system. Younger Lebanese, who drove public protests last fall seem ready for such a change. However, vested interests remain strong, especially given persistent foreign meddling, which prevents Lebanon's emergence as a truly independent state.

When I visited Lebanon five years ago, some people I spoke with, especially Christians, wished for America to sort out their problems. Many supported Washington's campaign against Iran but have since grown frustrated by the lack of any positive agenda for Lebanon. It has become evident to them that the administration's overwhelming commitment to Israel and Saudi Arabia leaves little room for Lebanon.

However, even if the administration cared more about Beirut's (and America's!) interests, it has little ability to force needed reforms. Although US officials say they would not try to block another government which includes Hezbollah, that offers little comfort when Washington is attacking it through other means. Unfortunately, the US campaign against Iran and automatic backing for Israel ensures that Hezbollah will resist any American initiative.

France is by far the better choice to promote change in Lebanon. First, it shares responsibility for that nation's creation. Moreover, Paris is less tainted these days than America from playing perennial political favorites and waging endless wars in the Mideast. Macron also appears to be filled with restless energy and ready to play social engineer abroad as his political approval rating falls at home.

Unfortunately, though Macron's burst of activity in Lebanon – he has visited twice since the explosion – initially spurred some hope, so far his demands for thoroughgoing reform have achieved precisely nothing. He has little leverage, and even his promise of aid, which remains heavily dependent on international institutions and other nations, pales in comparison to the potential cost of reform to those most invested in the current system. Indeed, another, though much less destructive, port fire occurred a couple weeks ago, reinforcing the sense of popular impotence as politicians continued to squabble.

Over the last couple decades Paris pushed several aid/debt relief conferences, most recently just two years ago, which helped underwrite the current system while delivering little reform. Without deep, transformational change, bailing out Lebanon again would be foolish. Sectarian misrule, government incompetence, religious abuse, corrupt governance, and foreign interference would continue. Another crisis would be inevitable.

Ultimately, only the Lebanese people can reform a political system which has repeatedly and dramatically failed. Lebanon has been a nation under construction for decades, indeed, a century, with disappointing, even disastrous results. Domestic obstacles remain many and difficult. The political "system has hit a wall a long time ago and it's impossible for it to move forward," complained Bachar el-Halabi, an analyst with ClipperData.

Even worse, though, is outside interference. The impact of Iran, Syria, Saudi Arabia, and Israel on Lebanon has been almost entirely negative. Hezbollah's link to Tehran poses the biggest

single challenge. As noted earlier, America's role, though better intentioned, often has been unhelpful, and is particularly negative today.

Given the difficulty in building support for meaningful political reform, Lebanese should consider the dreaded "P" word, partition. There are 18 officially recognized faiths, for whose benefit the state has been shaped. Perhaps Hezbollah and any other Shiites who want to join with that group should have their own state. Christians could propose a non-confessional community in which all would be welcome, so long as they accepted everyone else. The latter might become a model of tolerance and community for the rest of the Middle East. Sunnis, the other large Lebanese grouping, could choose one of the former or go their own way.

Lebanon long has been a somewhat reluctant oasis of tolerance and diversity in the Middle East, with all faiths welcomed. The country also has accepted refugees fleeing successive regional crises. Yet Lebanon's oft-demonstrated resilience is being severely tested today.

To help this unique community survive, Washington should address Lebanon on its own merits, rather than as a weapon to advance America's other geopolitical objectives. Beirut deserves every aid in its fight to survive as a free commercial society.

Doug Bandow is a Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute. A former Special Assistant to President Ronald Reagan, he is the author of Foreign Follies: America's New Global Empire.