



THE REVIVAL OF LEBANESE DEMOCRACY

Excerpt - Lebanese Information Center.

In order to successfully draw a road to democracy in Lebanon, it is necessary to know the historical background and to understand the existence of the political divide amongst Lebanese groups, mainly Christians and Muslims. By acknowledging this diversity our goal is to find a system that allows all Lebanese to coexist peacefully within a free and sovereign Lebanon, and be a model of democracy among other nations in the Middle East.

Lebanon existed as a country since biblical times and is geographically located at the gate to the Middle East. By the 4th century A.D., most Lebanese have converted to Christianity and offered in the rugged Lebanese mountains a safe haven for nearby minorities. Throughout its history, conquerors have invaded it to gain strategic leverage in regional dominance. In the 7th century A.D. the Arab-Islamic armies conquered most of the seaside cities and forced their inhabitants to convert to Islam. Those who refused to leave their Christian faith took refuge in the impenetrable Lebanese mountains. The forced conversions left a permanent mark on the demographics of Lebanon with repercussions affecting Lebanon till the current day.

Since then, the history of Lebanon is filled with religious and violent conflicts, provoked by surrounding nations and often resolved by major powers intervening to secure the delicate balance among the religious groups.

The formation of a “Greater Lebanon” in 1920 with its current borders aimed to create a geopolitical entity regrouping the Christians and the Muslims. The constitution of 1926 enforced this reality by establishing a Parliamentary Democracy, unique in the fact that it is the only one in the Arab world that separates religion from state. The National Pact of 1943, following the independence from France, was based on a pact based on the Christians’ pledge of political detachment from the West, represented by France, in exchange for the Muslims’ allegiance to Lebanon as a nation, living within the Arab World, but totally independent.

The fragile equilibrium was challenged by ultra nationalist events in the Arab world re-igniting the interest of some Muslims to be a part of a bigger Muslim nation while rekindling the fears of the Christians.

The Muslims in Lebanon identified with Egypt's president, Jamal Abdul Nasser, quest to dominate a united Arab world in the 1950s and 60s, and then saw in the Palestinian armed presence in Lebanon a vehicle to reach more power. The destabilization of the Lebanese pact led in 1975 to a civil war with massive Palestinian military involvement that dismantled the central government. Simultaneously, direct interference from Syria aimed to turn Lebanon into a satellite state governed by Syrian proxies and devoid from the democracy and freedom it once enjoyed. Later, the Syrian- Iranian alliance succeeded in making Lebanon a front for the execution of these two countries agendas and an enemy to the West and the United states.

The Syrian-Iranian supported radical Muslim organizations- most notably Hezbollah, to replace the Palestinians as agents of instability and facilitated the use of terror as in the 1983 Marines barracks bombing, to eradicate western presence in Lebanon.

The coexistence experience in Lebanon could have succeeded if it were not for the external interference of neighboring dictatorial regimes provoking and arming various factions while deliberately weakening the central government. The regimes of Syria, Iran and earlier Egypt, Iraq, Libya along with Palestinian forces under Arafat, have all played a crucial role in destabilizing Lebanon and undermining its religious diversity in order to gain leverage in the political landscape of the Middle East. Ultimately Syria gained dominance by playing both the roles of the arsonist and the fireman and today through its occupation it safeguards the Assad regime and exerts critical influence over the stability in the region. Calls for Syrian withdrawals by the Christians are often answered by the threat of revival of the civil war. The prospect of a Democracy, free elections, freedom of speech, freedom of religion, peaceful and proactive citizenry by Lebanese are ultimately the very real threat that frightens the Syrian regime and beyond it all the other dictatorial regimes in the Arab world. It is this threat that prompted so much interest in destabilizing Lebanon. Unfortunately, this played in the hands of many Muslim Lebanese and has led to strengthening a group of radical organizations such as Hezbollah in their quest for creating an Iran-like Islamic republic.

Under the current conditions and based on history, Lebanon with its pluralistic composition could only survive under a democratic system that can offer the guarantees to protect any group from being diluted or marginalized.

Any solutions for the present Lebanese crisis should be based on International guarantees of Lebanon's sovereignty, total territorial integrity and its Neutrality. The solution should involve the creation of a Pluralistic Democracy which gives relative autonomy to all religious groups while allowing sufficient interaction amongst them.

In preparation for the Lebanese solution, measures should be taken to allow a suitable environment for the implementation of a political solution. A necessary priority should be granted to the protection of individual freedoms and civil liberties. This could be only achieved after the disarming and dismantling of all remaining militias and the complete withdrawal of Syrian forces and intelligence apparatus from Lebanon. Also, Lebanon should revive the 1949 armistice agreement with Israel and enter peace negotiations with its neighbor.

The Lebanese Democracy, once revived, would allow Lebanon to play a crucial role in spreading democracy in the Middle East. This would only be possible by a strong and long term commitment from the United States to support the freedom, independence and sovereignty of Lebanon and to assist in establishing a pluralistic and decentralized form of government that protects the rights of all religious groups. The US goal to democratize the Middle East would have a greater probability of success if after Iraq the Lebanese democracy is revived to act as a model for other Arab nations.

A free and democratic Lebanon will cease to be a source of terrorism and instability in the region and it will regain its role as a natural friend of the West and serve as a beacon of prosperity and freedom in the Middle East.