

## II. Recent Political History in Lebanon

by Malcolm Russell

In the summer of 1974, the *Daily Star*, Beirut's English newspaper, printed a satirical article suggesting that the south of Lebanon be rented as an arena to settle military conflicts around the world. After all, the Palestinians and Israelis were already using it for that purpose.

The author could hardly have realized that within little more than a year Beirut itself, the commercial center and fleshpot of the Middle East, would itself be blown apart by its Lebanese and Palestinian residents.

The suddenness, ferocity, and duration of the fighting caught many by surprise, for as recently as the spring of 1975 political analysts were still commenting on the "remarkable stability and absorptive capacity of the Lebanese system in the face of the country's pluralistic, heterogeneous makeup."<sup>1</sup>

In many ways, however, the conflict does not seem surprising. Lebanese politics, while democratic in form, have been more akin to an international balance of power rather than any model of a nation state.<sup>2</sup> The Republic of Lebanon, in fact, was and is a state at best. It is not a nation, but a unit drawn up to meet the requirements of the modern world and the past desires of a certain section of its population.

Greater Lebanon was formed by France, in 1920, as a colonial enterprise, in contrast to the traditional Jabal Lubnan (Mt. Lebanon). The latter had remained an outpost of Christianity and a refuge for minorities for centuries. The new state was the fulfillment of Maronite Catholic aims: to the lean but free Mountain was added the commercial wealth of Beirut and the fertility

of the Biqa' valley to the East. The port of Tripoli, with excellent communications to the interior, was also added, as was the predominantly Shi'a Moslem area bordering on Palestine.

Thus, what had been a largely Maronite and Druze (heterodox Moslem) principality under Ottoman rule became a state with a slight Christian majority holding to one culture while a large Moslem minority looked to union with Syria, defined by fluctuatingly limited or expansive borders.

With the coming of independence from France in 1943, relations between the major communities were defined by the National Pact, which stipulated national policy on the chief issues of the day. Both Moslems and Christians were to turn away from political links with other nations, and support an independent country. Internally, a confessional government was established, with the president of the republic and the military commander both from the Maronite sect. The National Pact was reaffirmed by the 1958 civil war, which blocked an attempt by a Maronite president to gain greater power and a second term. Foreign policy, too, was affected: henceforth, it would be basically neutralist, rather than pro-Western.

Leadership and power in the country have generally gone to traditional notable families, who have been compared to city bosses in American cities at the turn of the century. Their careers have spanned almost the entire independence period; Kamal Jumblat, Pierre Jumayyil and Camille Cham'un, today respectively the leader of the Moslem left, Christian right, and interior minister, united in 1952 to oust a president. All three of these men, and many other deputies like them, established "parties" and organized private militias, but in fact gained and maintained power as individuals. In this, they were aided by the electoral system, under which

Malcolm Russell, a doctoral candidate at Johns Hopkins University, is writing a dissertation on the modern history of Lebanon and Syria. He will shortly join the history department at Andrews University.

the unicameral parliament was apportioned on the basis of religion, and voters generally selected only the local representative of their religion. Electoral reform, by creating larger districts or even a single one for the whole nation, might have upset the traditional aristocracy by forcing them to appeal for votes in other religious communities and to create alliances—parties—with ideologically similar politicians of other sects. To date, however, no uniquely Lebanese party spanning the religious divisions of society has appeared.

Within such a pluralistic state, it was natural that many freedoms would be maintained. The press, worship, education and even personal status have been largely beyond the government's control; similarly, the levantine mercantile traditions continued, with private enterprise providing services which elsewhere in the Middle East and Europe were state responsibility. As a center of banking and commerce, few controls were placed on the economy, and imported goods were widely in evidence.

But behind the facade of the new skyscrapers and land values among the highest in the world, there were certain crucial government weaknesses, which are generally conceded to have been an element in the growing dissatisfaction which provided the background for the present conflict. Personal income lay largely beyond the tax structure, which was generally based on indirect taxation and was largely regressive. Income was very unequally distributed: about half the population, in 1959, was considered poor or destitute, while four percent of the inhabitants earned a third of the wealth. These statistics have not been updated, but there is reason to believe that the gap between rich and poor has been growing. The gap certainly has become more visible, despite a growing professional class in some ways akin to a "middle class" in the United States. Related to this socially undesirable feature was relatively high unemployment, despite a system of labor permits which excluded many Palestinians (who might have even been born in Lebanon) and other non-Lebanese.

Other aspects of the economic system were not so free, and the general public frequently suffered from governmental measures. Importers

were allowed exclusive franchises on their goods, thus allowing some monopoly profit. Despite a steep revaluation of the Lebanese lira, greater than that of the German mark against the dollar (1973-74), prices of imported goods rose rather than fell. Beirut was no longer an attractive place to purchase merchandise ranging from Swiss watches to American pens and Japanese cameras, and certain goods—inexpensive textiles from the Far East, for example—did not seem to find their way into the country. From this the poor suffered, but Parisian fashions were displayed for the wealthy at prices the poor could not imagine.<sup>3</sup>

Certainly, the economy was growing, at a rate close to ten percent annually, but the lower income groups were not helped by government policies such as a monopoly concession granted to one company in 1975 for fishing rights for the whole coast. Even those who had done well in the capitalist economy were strongly critical of the government's corruption and inefficiency,<sup>4</sup> and in recent years both left and right agreed on the need for significant reform.

Given the favorable Middle East economic situation, it is conceivable that concessions by the Maronites and Sunni Moslem notables could have satisfied many of the relatively moderate demands of the leftists. However, concession and change seem to have been contrary to the personality of the president, Sulayman Franjiyya, and the catalyst necessary for full-scale bloodshed was present in the form of the Palestinian guerrilla movement. The Lebanese state no longer could claim that most significant characteristic of governmental authority: a monopoly on the use of force.

Operating out of refugee camps which the Lebanese military were unable to defend from Israeli attack, the Palestinian Resistance in all its splintered forms soon became a state within a state. Guerrillas crossing the border were not subject to the same passport controls as civilians. Checkpoints of Palestinians demanded the identity papers of Lebanese citizens on Lebanese soil, and camouflaged as guerrillas, thieves stole automobiles and lesser valuables. Insecurity reigned, there were political kidnappings and murders, and the Lebanese press, despite legal freedoms, could no longer objectively report Palestinian affairs.

Both sides of the political spectrum utilized

the Palestinian presence in the political struggle. The left demanded reforms as a pre-condition for treating the "security issue," and the right, in keeping with tradition, required order first, then concessions. In effect, a new National Pact was needed to unify the country over new issues, and the leftists for the first time had a military force as disciplined and organized as their Maronite rivals on the right. Instead of compromise, Franjiyya attempted to bypass the traditional Moslem leadership and crack down on the guerrillas in 1973. He failed, and the inability of the police and army to halt fighting between the rightist, Maronite Kata'ib (Phalange) Party, and the Palestinians became evident over the next year. Armed and supplied from abroad, liberally financed by foreign

nations and groups, each side prepared for a conflict that was increasingly probable.

When it did come, and heavy fighting broke out, all Lebanon, not just the south, became the arena for a war among gladiators who had begun fighting over local issues but increasingly represented regional and international power struggles. Preserving the unity and integrity of Lebanon required the introduction of a peace-keeping force which would have conflicted with another currently popular ideal, that of not intervening militarily. Countries outside the Middle East made nonintervention their highest priority and so could do little but await the end of a conflict whose sides had been largely determined by religion, but whose goals were now almost completely political.

#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Peter Gubser, reviewing "Pluralism and Party Transformation in Lebanon: al-Kata'ib, 1936-70." *Middle East Journal*, vol. 29 no. 2 (Spring 1975), pp. 220-221.

2. See Michael Hudson's aptly entitled *The Precarious Republic*, probably the best book on Lebanese politics.

3. A reporter for the British press was amazed to find refugee urchins hawking gold cigarette lighters for 1.50

Lebanese lira each. The youngsters had looted them and were selling them for far below their value.

4. The postal service, while moderately successful in handling incoming mail for Beirut's main post office boxes, completely failed internally. A letter would take a week to ten days from posting in Beirut to delivery in Tripoli, 60 miles away.

## III. A Sociologist Looks At His Homeland

by Anees Haddad

**T**he Seventh-day Adventist Church has made Lebanon the nerve-center of its work in the Middle East and East Africa. In and around Beirut are the headquarters of the Afro-Mideast Division, the Middle Eastern Union, the East Mediterranean Field, Middle East Press, the Voice of Prophecy Correspondence Schools, and very significantly, Middle East College, a senior college affiliated with Loma Linda University.

Most of the denominational workers from Istanbul in the north to Khartoum in the south, and from Teheran in the east to Alexandria in

the west, have received their full or partial education at Middle East College. Situated about seven miles from the heart of Beirut, it sits astride a hill occupying about 70 acres, with a majestic view of the city and the Mediterranean Sea beyond.

Just to the northwest of the college sits Middle East Press, a multilanguage literature powerhouse for millions of people. Less than a block downhill is the headquarters of the Middle East Union Field, which has jurisdiction now over what used to be the Middle East Division. One half-mile downrange towards the capital is the headquarters of the Afro-Mideast Division of Seventh-day Adventists, a fence-encircled compound from which the affairs of 165,000 Seventh-day Adventists are managed.

Anees Haddad, a sociologist, is director of the Division of Behavioral Sciences at Loma Linda University. He was formerly youth director of the Middle East Division.