

Lebanon's Impossible Options

John Voll

Can a moderate parliamentary democracy survive in the tensions of the Middle East? This is the question confronting Lebanon in the face of military raids by its neighbors and potential civil war. Israeli attacks and Palestinian pressures create a continuing crisis which has undermined the foundations of both Lebanese moderation and democracy.

Since independence Lebanon has maintained its position as a nonmilitaristic democracy supporting moderate solutions to the conflicts in the Middle East. Despite great pressures it has remained Western-oriented and has withstood the siren calls of radical socialism and militant nationalism. Yet when Lebanon was under threat and attack, it received remarkably little concrete support from the major Western powers. One result has been a growing frustration among Lebanese, many of whom believe that no matter what they do they will be attacked and possibly destroyed by forces beyond their control.

The unusual nature of the Lebanese political system makes it especially vulnerable. The tensions of the Arab-Israeli dispute in particular pose major threats to its continued existence. These dangerous pressures come from both Israel and the other Arabs, especially from the Palestinian guerrilla groups.

The heart of Lebanon's existence is its peculiar sense of community. The majority of the Lebanese is made up of groups who came to the area to find a refuge in its rugged mountains and isolated valleys. Some, such as the Maronite Catholics and the Druses, have been there for many centuries. Others, such as the Armenians, are more recent arrivals. Lebanon is thus a country of minorities, and no group can claim to be a majority of the population. It is more than a matter of Christians and Muslims living together.

JOHN VOLL teaches Middle Eastern history at the University of New Hampshire.

Many distinctive communities within both the Muslim and Christian traditions try to maintain their own special identity. In the past the unique conditions of Lebanon have made this possible. The Lebanese sense of identity is that of a society composed of many separate groups.

Most major groups have close ties with communities outside Lebanon. This is most obvious with the two major groups, the Sunni Muslims and the Maronite Catholics. The Sunnis, or "orthodox" Muslims, are part of the majority group in the world Muslim community. As a result they feel especially close to the surrounding Arab-Muslim countries and maintain close ties of communal and personal identification with these lands. The Maronites, on the other hand, are one of the Eastern Christian churches that have recognized the supremacy of the Pope and are part of the Roman Catholic Church. As a result they have traditionally had good relations with Western Catholic countries, especially France, which has often acted as the patron of the Maronite community.

The smaller Lebanese communities also have ties of sympathy with groups outside Lebanon. The Shi'a Muslims feel a bond with other Shi'as. The Lebanese Shi'a leaders, for example, make frequent visits to Iran, the one Muslim country where Shi'ism is the official religion of the state and the majority of the people. The Druses are well aware of their brothers in the neighboring countries, and even the Arab-Israeli border does not block the fraternal feelings between the Israeli and Lebanese Druse communities. Lebanese Armenians also have some feelings for a non-Lebanese area, being very conscious of a region where Armenian is the official language—the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic in the USSR.

Despite these external ties, all these groups have lived together in Lebanon with a remarkable degree of mutual toleration and stability. Their life to-

gether is based upon a fundamental social compromise. Most groups realize that to survive and maintain their own special communal identities they must cooperate and coexist. To do this, all agree not to let their ties to non-Lebanese groups or states become so strong as to change the nature of their participation in Lebanese society.

The major crises for Lebanon have come when one or more groups have moved away from this basic compromise. Thus in 1958 Lebanon became involved in a civil war when some Sunnis and Maronites went beyond the acceptable limits. A Maronite President acted in such a way that the Sunnis felt that Lebanon would become a satellite of the West, while many Muslims in the cities became excited by the idea of Arab unity in concrete form, as exemplified by the then newly formed union of Syria and Egypt.

At the present time the Arab-Israeli dispute, and especially the issue of the Palestinian refugees and the guerrilla organizations, is putting special pressures on the Lebanese social and political compromise. There is a solid popular basis of sympathy for, and identification with, the Palestinian cause. Many Sunnis, who identify with the Arab world in general, see the Palestinian struggle as basic to the Arab cause of which they are a part. In addition, many Lebanese, both Christian and Muslim, have had direct ties with Palestine. Historically the eastern coastal region of the Mediterranean was not divided into closed social and political units.

Amin al-Hafiz, who was the Lebanese prime minister in a short-lived government after the Israeli raid on Beirut in April, 1973, illustrates well these interconnections. Although his family is centered in Lebanon, he himself was raised in Jerusalem. After the establishment of Israel, he left and received his higher education in Egypt before settling in Lebanon. Thus, although firmly Lebanese, he has a solid feeling of engagement in the Arab world in general and the Palestinian cause in particular. In fact, almost all Lebanese have at least some feeling of association with Arab nationalism. Some of the early leaders of the modern revival of Arabic literature and national feeling were Lebanese, both Christian and Muslim. In this context, Lebanese leaders cannot adopt policies that stray too far from the general Arab position.

The present crisis involves a more specific aspect of the Arab-Israeli conflict: the role of the Palestinian guerrilla groups and their actions in Lebanon. These organizations are a small but very active part of the Palestinian refugees living in the country. With the support of radical Lebanese they press for a stronger and more active Lebanese role in support of the militant programs of activist Palestinians. On the other side, Lebanon faces the charge made by Israel that the country has provided more support for the guerrillas than is acceptable. The Israelis demand

that the Lebanese destroy the guerrilla presence and have recently gone further in claiming for themselves the right to attack Palestinians in Lebanon. Direct military actions such as the destructive raid on the Beirut Airport or the commando raid killing Palestinian leaders in Beirut in April are part of an Israeli policy that has killed both Palestinians and Lebanese.

Lebanon thus faces two forces which in many ways are beyond its control. Both Israel and the radical Palestinians are trying to force Lebanon into adopting more extreme policies. In this dilemma is the potential for destroying Lebanon itself.

Lebanon would seem to have three options. It could give more active and concrete support to the Palestinian groups. Every Israeli attack produces some voices calling for just such a policy and creates a broader base of anti-Israeli feeling in the country. The consequences of this option would, however, probably be disastrous. Such an activist policy could easily upset the delicate balance of the Lebanese compromise, resulting in a new civil war in Lebanon itself. While the Maronites are sympathetic to the Palestinian cause, even the present attempts at Lebanese-Palestinian agreement are unacceptable to many of them. Short of a civil war, this option would lead to increasingly destructive Israeli attacks and the possibility of Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon. Most Lebanese are aware of these possibilities and view the price of this policy option as being too high.

The second option is to attempt to crush all guerrilla activity in the country. It must be remembered that the Lebanese continue to place severe limitations on the guerrilla organizations. The open battles throughout the country in April and May show the extent to which the Lebanese are determined to maintain these restrictions. To do significantly more than this the Lebanese government would have to adopt some important new policies. These would probably include strict censorship and severe limitations on freedom of speech and the press. In other words, Lebanon would have to sacrifice much of its current democratic practice. In more practical terms, the Lebanese would have to expand their army to meet threats of both internal insecurity and external intervention. At present the Lebanese army is one of the smallest in the region as a result of the general nonmilitaristic posture of Lebanon. Nor is the army the only organized armed force in the country. In addition to the Palestinian guerrilla forces there are also paramilitary forces maintained by some Lebanese political parties. A significant expansion of the army to cope with all of these forces would divert money away from development, require more strict governmental controls and could in many ways lead to a militarizing of the state. Again, the cost of such policies would be the undermining of the existing

democratic structure and the generally free-enterprise economy of the country.

The second part, like the first, would arouse much resentment within Lebanon. Even with a much stronger army Lebanon could not duplicate Jordan's bloody suppression of the guerrillas, since it would face a civil war of its own as well as possible outside intervention. The attacks on the more radical Palestinian groups in the spring opened such possibilities. Probably the only way that such a policy could be implemented would be through the emergence of martial law and suspension of civil liberties. The price of the second option might well be the loss of Lebanese democracy, if not the destruction of the country through a civil war.

The remaining option open to Lebanese policy-makers is to try to continue the general line that has been in effect for some time. This means maintaining a moderate position that would not upset the careful internal political and social balance while at the same time trying to minimize external threats to the system. This includes continuing the present controls over guerrilla activity with a willingness to enforce these restrictions militarily if necessary. At the same time, Lebanon would maintain its general position of sympathy for the Palestinian cause. Lebanon would continue to be ready to work for and accept some kind of a peaceful, political solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict. Contrary to some recent comments by Israelis, the Lebanese have been and remain generally moderate and open to a suitable negotiated settlement, although continued Israeli attacks make such a position difficult to maintain.

From an internal point of view, this third option would appear to be the most practical for the Lebanese. For it to be a viable option, however, there must be greater outside recognition of Lebanon's special circumstances. In particular, while Israeli pressures on Lebanon probably will be maintained at a high level, Israeli policy-makers should recognize that the destruction of the Lebanese political system as it now exists could result from Israeli actions. There is no reason to think Israel's situation would be more secure if her neighbor to the north

collapsed into the anarchy of civil war. Increased Israeli pressures only serve to convince an increasing number of Lebanese that such a civil war is Israel's "real goal," since it would provide a pretext for Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon. Thus Israeli threats of intervention may serve to deter Syrian intervention but do not necessarily help Lebanon's long-term survival. Nor would Israel's position be strengthened if the small, moderate democracy of Lebanon were replaced by the rule of a conservative military strong man. Acquiescence in the destruction of a democracy is never a safe course for a country which claims to be a democracy itself. Similarly, Western powers such as the United States would have to do more to assure the Lebanese that a continuation of its present moderate policies would receive at least some concrete great power support from outside the Eastern bloc.

In all of this one gets the feeling that all Lebanese are in much the same position as the villagers of Hasbaya, the southern village bombed by the Israelis in 1972. The inhabitants of this Druse village had never been happy about the guerrilla presence in their area. They had succeeded in getting the guerrillas entirely out of Hasbaya village and into a camp of their own some distance from town. Then a local incident aroused the anti-guerrilla sentiments of the villagers, and they demanded that the guerrillas be expelled from the whole region. Within a week of making this demand the homes and shops of many of these villagers were destroyed, not by Palestinians seeking some kind of revenge, but by the Israeli Air Force. Israeli officials later blamed the attack on a "technical error."

Hasbaya represents the crisis of Lebanese democracy. As a result of a conflict it did not create, Lebanon is caught between forces over which it has little control. The series of acts that destroy Lebanese democracy might be "technical errors" or "strategic errors" or just "mistakes," but however described the result would be disastrous for Lebanon. Unless great caution is exercised by all concerned, a small, moderate, civilian democracy might soon be destroyed.