

MULTICULTURALISM IN LEBANON

OBSTACLES & PROSPECTS

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, I am both honored and very delighted to be here and I would like to thank both, the organizers and Georgetown University for making this possible.

"Three issues are decisively at stake today: the survival of the state of Lebanon as a free, independent and sovereign state; the survival of the society of Lebanon as a free, open and pluralist society; and the survival of the Christian community of Lebanon a free and secure, enjoying complete mastery over its own values and destiny. How to avert these three dangers is precisely what is meant by the term "the Lebanese Cause."¹

I do not intend by citing the above to invoke nostalgic memoirs of the 15-years of war in Lebanon , but rather to illustrate how the three dangers that Dr. Charles Malik spoke about 27 years ago are still present and relevant, today, as they were in the recent past, and as they will remain in the future if we fail to act.

Certainly, the country today still has a long walk to march in terms of consolidating its territorial integrity, sovereignty and independence. It has yet to fortify its pluralistic and multicultural face following the systematic "Syrianization" it underwent since 1990, where forced assimilation into the Syrian despotic orbit became the order of the day. Finally, in light of the current divisions among the Christians of Lebanon, the community's continuity, dignity and survival is called into question more than ever before.

Obviously, all three dangers are interrelated. However, as this is not the time to work out the total question of these dangers, I will do with highlighting the second aspect of these dangers; mainly, the survival of the society of Lebanon as a free, open and pluralist one.

First, some basic historical facts (Thawabit in Arabic) about Lebanon:

- Lebanese life is based on pluralism, but one that is profoundly different from that found in the West. A Western country is premised on a more or less unifying worldview that can be roughly designated as a Judeo-Christian/secular-humanist. In contrast, Lebanon lacks any unifying worldview and instead features a plurality of antagonistic and often clashing outlooks, with no single umbrella to bind and hold them together.

¹ Foreword to "The Lebanon We Want to Build" document by Dr. Charles Malik, January 5 1981. Document issued by The Lebanese Front on December 23, 1980 at Aoukar's Monastery in North Metn. Charles Malik helped draft the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights with Chair and President of the Human Rights Commission, U.S. Delegate to the U.N. General Assembly, Eleanor Roosevelt. He succeeded Mrs. Roosevelt as the Human Rights Commission's Chair. He remained as ambassador to the US and UN until 1955. He was an outspoken participant in debates in the United Nations General Assembly and often criticized the Soviet Union. After a three-year absence, he returned in 1958 to preside over the thirteenth session of the United Nations General Assembly.

- Lebanon is the sum of approximately eighteen heterogeneous religious communities: Maronite and Eastern Orthodox Christians, Sunni and Shia Muslims, Druze, and a host of lesser denominations and sects.
- Lebanon hosts the freest Christian community in the Middle East. In addition, it hosts the region's most culturally sophisticated Muslim communities .
- In Lebanon, as distinct from its Arab neighbors, society has traditionally been stronger and more durable than the state. Lebanon's civil society features active churches and religious organizations, a large network of banks and businesses, excellent schools and universities, a vigorous tradition of publishing, competent hospitals and medical facilities, a flourishing entertainment and services sector, and many independent unions, associations, and syndicates of students, labor, legal, medical, engineering... which together lead to economic prosperity in a free market system.

With that in mind, I will move on to offer a socio-political overview of Lebanon from 1943 to our present time. Focus will be on the dynamics of pluralistic societies, as they apply to Lebanon, in addition to a diagnosis of what went wrong since the end of the war in 1990, and the withdrawal of Israeli and then the Syrian armies in 2000 and 2005 respectively.

Overview 1943 - 1990

Between Lebanon's first independence in 1943 and the eruption of warfare in 1975, the Lebanese polity endured periods of severe internal strain (particularly in 1958 and 1969) that destabilized the country's delicate political fabric and stirred latent tensions of sectarian discord. These quarrels served as an early indicator, but went unnoticed or disregarded by many. In 1975, the Lebanon War erupted and each entity had to seek regional and/or international protégés as the central government and its security agencies was either unable or unwilling to interfere to end the hostilities. On October 13, 1990, the fifteen-year war ended with another act of war (The Syrian assault on Baabda's Presidential Palace to oust Gen. Michel Aoun), which reduced the country to a satellite entity revolving in Syria's orbit.

Interesting to mention here is that the Lebanon War did not end subsequent to a formal peace agreement accepted by all the rival parties. Nor did the war end with a peace conference sponsored by the United Nations and/or through the direct participation of major powers. Whatever substitute to a peace agreement or peace conference was reached between Lebanese factions, it was embodied in the Document of National Understanding, commonly called the Ta'if Agreement, signed by Lebanese deputies in the Saudi city of Ta'if on October 22, 1989.

Due to its inconsistency with human rights protections, unsuitability with Lebanon's intrinsic cultural pluralism, and the methodical "Syrianization" that it underwent, Ta'if failed in positively delivering. For example, alarming tendencies to limit some of the basic individual rights were detected in the Agreement— freedom of media, of education, and of political organization and the trade unions². As anticipated, Ta'if's shortcomings had their toll on the human rights situation on the ground: from curtailing freedom of expression and assembly, clamping down on students and opposition activists, to torture and judiciary coercion, to kidnappings and killings. (Boutros Khawand, Pierre Boulos, Ramzi Irani...)

² For a good critique of Ta'if and particularly its impact on human rights and Lebanese sovereignty, see Muqarrarat At-Ta'if wa Huquq Al-Insan (The Ta'if Accords and Human Rights), Beirut; Foundation for Human & Humanitarian Rights/ Lebanon (FHHR/L), December 1989.

Following Syrian troops withdrawal in April of 2005 to date, the failure of the Lebanese cabinet to foster consensus on decisive and deep-seated issues have begged the question of whether Lebanon is initially a unified society fragmented by the occupier so that his mere retreat would unite Lebanese of all shades back together. Or whether Lebanon's society is inherently divided along cultural lines so that even if the occupier retreats the country will remain vulnerable to political paralysis, or worse, military hostilities? A natural response lies in the second reasoning, otherwise why the Lebanese did not unite de facto in the spring of 2005 when the Syrian occupiers retreated! We can't deny or overlook foreign meddling in Lebanon's internal affairs especially Iran and Syria.

By now, the obvious must have sunk in: it is artificial, if not illusive for mixed, composite or pluralist communities embodying diverse collective identities and persuasions to stay united within a Unitary State unless there is a strong federal government that is able to rule fairly as is the case in the US. In the absence of such a federal government, the result is either a rogue State (or a form of dictatorship) like Iraq under Saddam's regime where a tyrant rules by an iron fist, or a failed State like Lebanon where a majority imposes its exclusivist politics on a minority while others defy the sovereignty and legitimacy of the government. More so, in a failed state, a country often revolves in a vicious cycle between the two extremes of "political paralysis" and "internal fighting." In the Lebanese context, this has sadly been the case, as the country went from paralysis to confrontation almost every 15 years in its modern history.

So what went wrong?

Lebanon missed two opportunities since 1990 to transition itself to a country with a due democratic process. This does not mean that the Lebanese willingly gave up on these opportunities. In fact, the Lebanese had little say, if any, in the U.S.-brokered and Saudi-sponsored Ta'if agreement of 1989. It was a document based on a compromise to silence the guns and end the war. A reconciliation process went missing and almost overnight warlords became the custodians of a peaceful Lebanon.

The second opportunity came following Syrian withdrawal in April of 2005. It was imperative then for Lebanese politicians and lawmakers to call for a candid and lucid reassessment of Ta'if and all the archaic pre-war constitutional notions it revived, in accordance with the language of universal human rights that safeguard basic human rights and fundamental freedoms to groups as well as individuals especially women and children. However, this demand was overlooked and another opportunity for democratic revival was missed.

Is the situation reversible?

The answer lies in a "cautious yes," as this will depend on whether the Lebanese will speak up for themselves and deliberate in a national dialogue that oversees the drafting of a new political order that embodies the virtues of modernity, justice and equality.

Dialogue here should be serious, functional and practical. Not a politicized dialogue of course. But a dialogue that entails opening up to the other in a transparent and respectful manner. Putting on the table the issues that unite us along with the issues that divide us.

If the Lebanon War taught us anything, it is that the successive wars that Lebanon witnessed for years have proven that no one dominant culture can impose its values and orientation over the others for Lebanon is inherently a multicultural society with no "one" "unifying" culture for the Lebanese in effect. This, after all, is the genuine message of pluralism.

As such, complete recognition and respect of differences of belief will have to prevail.

One would not consider an alternative to the current constitutional structure had the unitary state been able to protect the country from foreign aggression and successive occupations, brought internal stability,

anchored the practice of the rule of law, and safeguarded essential rights and freedoms to communities and individuals alike.

Reflecting on other systems of governance that could set Lebanon on the track to recovery, democratic regionalism stands out as the one best able to manage the country's cultural diversity in a constructive fashion.

Regionalism for Lebanon will neither lead to a breakaway autonomy or secession, nor result in the tyranny of a majority over a minority. It will enable every community to enjoy complete mastery over its own values and living patterns while living in peace and dignity alongside the other. As such, the regionalist concept denotes "unity" rather than "partition."

To be rational however, I do not expect a regionalist democracy to be a solution to all of Lebanon's complex political problems. But I believe it will help us deal with those problems more efficiently.

Lebanese may agree or not on this notion, however if we are serious about the future, our future and our children future, it is imperative that we deliberate, academically and in a rational manner, over new options that could enable us to solve the perpetual crises we have been living time and again.

Lebanon's problem is not person/s-based. That is, put the right person in the right place and everything will work out. Lebanon's problem is organic. It is the problem of a political system that is too centralized to the extent of not being able to accommodate the grievances, fears and concerns of everyone.

I will end from where I started. From the document of The Lebanese Front, which embodies a vision of the Lebanon, we, as a new and forward-looking generation want to build:

"... We believe in the necessity of reconsidering the structural formula which has determined the politics of Lebanon since 1943, with a view to modifying it in such a way as to prevent any friction or clash between the members of the same Lebanese family.

This reconsideration might issue in an alteration of the structural formula into some kind of decentralization or federation or confederation within a comprehensive framework of a single unified Lebanon. Such has been the trend of the modern constitutional systems throughout the world. The aim of the alteration is to ensure that no disaster like the many disasters which befell Lebanon since 1840 will recur in the future. The new formula will be agreed upon among the Lebanese themselves in a climate devoid of compulsion or intimidation, whether arising from within or without..."
