



POINT OF VIEW

Hold the Line of Collapse at Lebanon

Habib C. Malik *

Lebanon is a small and internally complicated country, so why should anyone on the outside bother? And since at present it is also tranquil then maybe it is wise just to leave good enough alone. These realities, while true, cannot constitute valid reasons for open-ended benign neglect. Hidden corrosive forces in and around the tiny country are constantly at work, and sudden calamitous setbacks as happened on many occasions in Lebanon's recent past remain a menacing possibility at all times. What sits quietly and unobtrusively on the sidelines could merely out of carelessness find itself sliding into turmoil and thus be swiftly catapulted to center-stage with ugly fallout on the immediate surroundings and possibly far beyond. In this respect Lebanon may not exactly be a ticking time-bomb since it does exhibit a healthy "been there, done that" resilience, but it persists as a delicately cobbled polity with much about it that is unfinished or unresolved, thereby harboring built-in vulnerabilities that are potentially worrisome.

There are features defining Lebanon that continue to render it a highly relevant and indeed prized entity in the Arab world and the Middle East environment at large. Despite its myriad problems, for example, Lebanon remains the freest society within its far wider Arab surroundings. The freedom with which people live, dress, and discuss openly in Lebanon is not duplicated to the same extent anywhere else in the Arab world—this despite having sustained years of internal strife and external occupation that did result in palpable erosions on the freedom index. On a daily basis when the country is calm its numerous religious communities interact economically, socially, educationally, and even at times politically in enviable constructive ways that other Arab lands can only dream of.

Lebanon also harbors the region's freest native Christian community, a community that in spite of its many shortcomings and the mounting challenges it faces has served, and continues to serve, as the infectious radiating source for much of the rest of the country's

precious freedoms, with tangible positive spillovers to other Arab societies in what is sadly a freedom-starved part of the world. These facts about Lebanon's freedoms are alone a sufficient reason for Europeans and Americans to take notice and do all in their power to insulate it from any catastrophic implosions or external threats, in particular toxic Islamist intrusions from war-torn Syria. The refugee pressures on Europe will spike tenfold should Lebanon become engulfed anew in sectarian violence, or suffer a major bout of instability induced by direct radicalizing from its troubled neighbor to the east. Already conditions in demographically and sectarianly challenged Lebanon have become much more strained with the influx of over 1.5 million Syrian refugees, the vast majority of them being Sunni Muslims. Repatriation of Lebanon's huge numbers of Syrian refugees either to a tranquil Syria when hostilities have come to an end, or preferably to tranquil safe zones inside a Syria still enduring internal conflict is a crucial and most urgent task that the international community needs to prioritize in all its calculations moving forward.

Lebanon's key drawback in the eyes of many outsiders is considered to be Hezbollah, the armed Shiite paramilitary group. Hezbollah is an extension to the Eastern Mediterranean of Iranian military power; it is openly hostile to Israel possessing a large arsenal of rockets and missiles; it is deeply involved in the neighboring Syrian conflict where its seasoned fighters have become battle-hardened; and it is considered to be the strongest and therefore the most politically influential force inside Lebanon surpassing in many respects the power of the Lebanese army. In addition to its direct involvement in Syria, Hezbollah is embroiled in Yemen, Iraq, and Bahrain on the side of Shiite military and opposition groups in what has become a bloody region-wide showdown between Sunnis and Shiites.

But matters are never that black and white in Lebanon or the Middle East as a whole, and in this respect Hezbollah is a complex phenomenon presenting a number of nuances. Hezbollah's military prowess and intelligence vigilance in Lebanon have contributed to the country's security against infiltration by ISIS fighters and suicide bombers from Syria, or the sprouting of ISIS sleeper cells among the Syrian refugees and in the Palestinian camps. Since the July-August 2006 war with Israel Hezbollah's posture has been principally a defensive one relying on a mounting stockpile of missiles that are able, in the event of a confrontation, to canvass the whole of Israel in salvos of several hundred each day for months on end. Israel's counter-strategy of threatening to visit upon Lebanon massive destruction should Hezbollah initiate hostilities has created a new deterrence equation that, as long as it holds, ensures no war will break out between Israel and Lebanon. No war even under such tense circumstances is preferable to assured war under any alternative set of givens. So everything should be done to maintain the existing mutual deterrence between Israel and Lebanon—something good for both and for everyone else—pending future circumstances that could signal the onset of a climate of de-escalation.

Exaggerations continue to swirl regarding Iran's influence in Lebanon. For sure Hezbollah, an Iranian proxy, is powerful on the Lebanese military and political scenes; however, by no means does the group enjoy a freehand in the labyrinthine maze of Lebanese politics. Constant calibrations of the projections of Shiite power must be made taking into consideration the other communities like the Sunnis and Christians. Saudi Arabia, a financial and political backer of the Sunni community, still exercises tangible clout in Lebanon as do other Sunni Gulf states like Qatar. The recent election of Christian leader Michel Aoun to the presidency in Lebanon has not translated into an automatic Hezbollah/Iran win, as many in the media have argued based on Aoun's memorandum of understanding signed years ago with Hezbollah that reconfigured the internal Lebanese political balances. By

bringing Aoun's followers, the largest Christian political grouping in the country, into a political alliance with Hezbollah, the dominant Shiite organization, the MOU at the time halted the Saudi-backed Sunni steamroller led by the late Rafiq Hariri, and subsequently by his son Saad, in its tracks. Now an Aoun-Saad Hariri arrangement as president and prime minister respectively appears to be taking shape without the full blessing of Hezbollah, and as a consequence political alliances are once again in flux.

Moreover, the received wisdom bandied about by many in the Western media and Washington think tanks that Iran constitutes the single greatest bogeyman in the region, a position reflective of Israeli priorities, ignores the other acute threat emanating from radical Sunni Islamist ideologies like Wahhabism and its derivatives. If President-elect Trump sees affinities with President Putin of Russia on jointly defeating ISIS and drying the ideological swamp that nourishes this barbarism, then the Trump Administration should in no way tamper with the Iran nuclear deal but instead move closer to a comprehensive understanding with Tehran on a wide range of issues vital to both. Such an American-Iranian rapprochement could itself serve as a future guarantee of Israel's security as well as help to stabilize the region. Khomeinism is odious indeed, but Wahhabism constitutes the more immediate and universal threat.

Lebanon will surely benefit from such an accord, and this will further insulate the beleaguered country from the winds of collapse sweeping across the Middle East. Protective nurturing is needed not merely for Lebanon itself but for preserving the positive rarities it stands for in its rough milieu: personal and group freedoms, societal openness, entrepreneurial vitality, political resilience, inclusive sectarianism, and pragmatic compromises. Surely a land that breeds these elusive yet essential qualities deserves to endure the unfolding wreckages of Arab failure.

***Associate Professor of History at the Lebanese American University (Byblos campus). He was born in Washington, D.C., 13 January 1954; holds both US and Lebanese citizenship; holds doctorate from Harvard University in modern European intellectual history. Taught in universities in Lebanon and in Washington, DC for over 3 decades, and currently divides his time teaching History, Cultural Studies, and occasional graduate seminars in Political Science at Lebanese American University, and researching late father Dr. Charles Malik's archives at Library of Congress in Washington plus working on a massive unpublished diary by same. Lectured, participated in conferences, and published books and articles in English and Arabic on the Middle East, Lebanon, Arab Christians, human rights, regional security and democratic prospects, federalism, existentialism, and Kierkegaard studies. Invited twice (2000 and 2011) to deliver scholarly papers at the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences in the Vatican. Books: Receiving Soeren Kierkegaard, The Early Impact and Transmission of his Thought (1997); Between Damascus and Jerusalem: Lebanon and Middle East Peace (1997, second edition 2000); Islamism and the Future of Christians in the Middle East (2010); edited the hitherto unpublished work by Charles Malik entitled The Systems of Whitehead's Metaphysics (2016).**