
LEBANON, POLITICAL PLAYGROUND
OF THE MIDDLE EAST
— THE ROLE OF PEACEKEEPING —

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INTRODUCTION

Although focused on Lebanon, this paper will not only deal with this very unfortunate country. I shall also try to examine very briefly some of the other regional conflicts and rivalries—frequently played out in Lebanon—which continue to make the Middle East one of the most politically explosive areas in the world. Finally, and very modestly, I should also like to propose a role that Portugal could potentially play in helping to manage and contain the threat that violence in the Middle East poses for the world community as a whole.

It might seem cynical to use the metaphor of «playground» in reference to Lebanon and her reoccurring miseries. But for many outside observers, the events in Lebanon over the last 15 to 20 years often does remind one of games—albeit games of a very dangerous and devastating kind played out by both the Lebanese themselves and their regional neighbours.

INTERNAL DIMENSION

It is necessary to understand certain aspects of Lebanon's internal social structure in order to understand why the country has been so vulnerable to outside penetration and manipulation. The following example is illustrative of at any rate one aspect.

Many of Lebanon's important families have their own football teams—as well as, of course, their own militias. The fortunes of the family team is followed with intense interest and its success against competitors

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is used as a certain measure of the familie's wider political standing. In April 1987 the Lebanese radio news reported on a game held the previous evening between the football team of the Syrian supported Maronite Christian family of Franjeh and a local competitor in Franjeh's home village of Zghorta. The home team had lost. When the game ended — this being Lebanon — the supporters of the victorious team took out an array of Magnum hand guns, Kalasnikov submachine guns and M-16 repeating rifles and fired joyously into the air. The losing Franjeh team responded immediately by taking out their arsenal of weapons and firing directly into the benches of their opponents. When the noise had died down and the smoke cleared, over 30 spectators were discovered seriously injured or dead. Tellingly, this event was not a headline news story. It was reported at the end of the broadcast as a minor human interest item.

This immediate, almost instinctive, recourse to violence in order to respond to what is perceived as insult and threat to family honour is a deep rooted feature of Lebanese society and is in fact common to large parts of the Mediterranean world. Indeed, violence and use of the institutions of blood feud and vengeance have traditionally been standard options for the resolution of conflict. As evidence for this we can, among other things, turn to the *Arabian Nights* and the story narrated by Shahrazad on night 528.

«A certain hunter came one day upon a cave in the mountains where he found a hollow full of bee's honey. So he took some honey and carried it to the city, followed by a hunting dog that was dear to him. He stopped at the shop of an oil man and offered him the honey for sale. As he emptied the honey, a drop fell to the ground, where upon the flies flocked to it and a bird swooped down on the flies. Now the oil man had a cat, which pounced upon the bird, and the hunter's dog sprang upon the cat and killed it. The oil man ran at the dog and killed it — and the hunter, in turn, sprang upon the oil man and killed him. Now the oil man was from one village and the hunter from another. When the people of the two villages heard what had passed, they took arms and rose upon one another in anger. The sword continued to play among them until many, many people had died. None knows their number, save God Almighty.»

In addition to the readiness to use violence to deal with conflict and grievance, this narrative also illustrates another fundamental feature of Lebanese — and, indeed, Middle Eastern society in general. That is its fragmentary or, more precisely, segmentary nature and organization. The adage of, «I against my brother. My brother and I against our cousins. Our cousins, my brother and I against...» and so on, is customary throughout the region and refers to a central element in Middle Eastern political process. This segmentary political process permeates relationships within family and religious groupings as well as relations between them.

Modern Lebanon was artificially constructed by the French during the aftermath of World War I with the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. France's primary purpose was not necessarily to construct a viable nation-state. Her main concern was to build — with human and territorial resources at hand — a reliable platform for the protection of French interests in the Levant and the extension of her influence to the rest of the Middle East. Thus modern Lebanon was built up out of an amalgam of diverse, frequently antagonist, religious communities — Shia Muslims, Sunni Muslims, Druze, Maronite Christians, Greek Orthodox Christians and so forth. These communities shared and currently share little, if any, sense of a common historical genealogy. They share little, if any, sense of a commonly defined «Lebanese» nationality. And very importantly, they share very few agreements as to what should be the desirable identity and framework required to govern Lebanon in the future. Some groups — mainly the Christian, but not solely — look to the West, especially to the United States and France, for their inspiration, identity and, notably, protection. Other groups — mainly Muslim groups, but again not only — look eastward especially toward Syria and, more recently, Iran for their definitions and for assistance.

If Lebanon is constructed out of diverse frequently antagonistic and highly competitive religious communities, these communities in turn are fragmented into diverse, frequently antagonistic and militantly competitive kinship groups. Broadly speaking, in Lebanon, as in the Middle East in general, the pivotal loyalty which an individual possesses is his loyalty to his extended family grouping. This loyalty usually supersedes loyalty to the religious community and certainly loyalty to the nation. A sense of nationhood is, in any case, weak and underdeveloped throughout most of the region.

On the local level the various family groups view each other as competitors. This competition is expressed in the on-going, frequently bloody feuds between them. Family factions tend to be locked into a perpetual process of rivalry and shifting tactical alliances as each faction attempts to increase its share of economic and political resources—and, thereby, its honour and prestige—at the expense of its opponents. This competition is played—albeit at times with considerable pragmatism—as a zero-sum game. Gains can only be achieved at the cost of rivals. In Lebanon honour is a limited good.

In pursuit of this aim of predatory expansion, each family tries to consolidate long reaching, dense patron-client relationships which often cross over religious boundaries. Very importantly, they also cross over national boundaries. In their rivalry for deference, position and power, the family based political factions of Lebanon actively court foreign protectors. The exact ideological identity of these foreign protectors is not crucial—hence, the bewildering melange of bizarre ideological marriages that so contort Lebanon's political geography and so confuse outsiders. What is critical is that potential protectors are powerful and they are willing.

In summary, it is this combination of, 1) the segmented, loose nature of Lebanese society, 2) the predatory, competitive nature of political life and, 3) the traditionally sanctioned readiness to use violence that constitutes a fundamental vulnerability of Lebanon. In particular, two additional features of Lebanon—which critically the country does not share with other Arab states—must be mentioned because they constitute the framework in which this vulnerability, common to many Arab states, has become disastrous for Lebanon. Traditionally the Lebanese state has been very weak. It was based on a fragile consensus between Maronite Christians and Sunni Muslims, a consensus now shattered. The Lebanese state has never had the power to protect itself from internal dissident forces nor to provide for its own defense against external intrusions. Moreover, in the context of the Middle East Lebanon has been a type of democracy in which political plurality could be expressed. In fact, many Arab states have used Lebanon as an escape vent and sounding board for political confrontations and expressions which they would never permit on domestic territory. Together these factors have meant that in recent years the Lebanese have almost explicitly had an open door policy for all too willing and eager foreign intervention.

Since the late 1960s this vulnerability has been even further exacerbated by a range of economic, social and political changes. To mention, very briefly, just three:

One, the extreme pace and unevenness of economic modernization in Lebanon has led to major social dislocations, especially among the youth. It should be noted that the majority of Lebanese are 18 years old or younger. In contrast to the prior generation, many young people suddenly found themselves urbanized, educated and, for a range of reasons, disbarred from desirable employment particularly in the public sector. In their alienation and resentment they turned for explanation and support to a range of new, radical and militant ideologies often coming from other Arab countries.

Two, demographic changes have resulted in the demotion of the pro-Western Christian population — previously a majority in the country — and the ascendancy of the Muslims — especially the Shia, Lebanon's most impoverished group — to majority position.

Finally, since the 1970s the steady increase of the Palestinian population in Lebanon has brought the country into the vortex of the Arab-Israeli confrontation.

These three changes have resulted in the demolition of the delicate constitutional compromises and balances upon which Lebanon was founded in 1943. Thus they have spelt the collapse of Lebanon's tenuous political stability. The country's inherent vulnerabilities, combined with the self-interest and influence of Lebanon's neighbours, have doggedly prevented the reestablishment of order and stability.

THE EXTERNAL DIMENSION

Cynically it could be argued that the mass killing of Lebanese by other Lebanese is clearly regrettable and certainly should cease, but that otherwise it does not really matter very much. After all Lebanon is an exceedingly small country. Without doubt, Lebanon — like Cyprus, Cambodia, the Horn of Africa and possibly in the future Afghanistan — represents a basket case of regional conflict. Despite the repeated efforts of many parties, it is a conflict that no one has been able to resolve.

But critically Lebanon is a basket case that sits astride of a highly sensitive and volatile fault line in vital regional and indeed international strategic balances. The earthquake that could result if this fault line crumbles could be devastatingly threatening for the West and for world order in general. Therefore, Lebanon matters very much.

For obvious reasons, the Middle East is of crucial interest to the United States. The protection of oil supplies as well as Israel's security are pillars of American foreign policy. The Middle East is also the back garden of the Soviet Union and, thus, of capital concern to that country as well. Broadly speaking, super power understanding on the Middle East, even at the height of the cold war, has been rather good. But the Middle East is not only a volatile and strategically important area, it is also a highly unpredictable one. Mismanagement and miscalculation are frequent and often lead to open, violent conflicts which carry the constant risk of escalation and regional destabilisation. The Iran-Iraq War is a recent example.

The states and political forces (for instance, the PLO) of the Middle East have gained the experience and political wisdom which prevents them, most of the time, from directly challenging each other militarily on the ground. However, they do tend to test and challenge each other indirectly inside Lebanon in the hope of using the bits and pieces of that country which fall under their influence or command to tactical advantage in the wider confrontation. In this sense, Lebanon is not only a domestic playground, it is a very dangerous and risky regional playground in which most of the Middle East's most incendiary conflicts and rivalries are expressed.

For instance, the Iran-Iraq War has now ceased — temporarily at least. Typically perhaps, Iraq has now become a major arms supplier to the Christian government, based in East Beirut and led by General Michel Aoun, Commander-in-Chief of the Lebanese Army. Very strange bed fellows indeed until one considers that General Aoun's principle rival is the Syrian backed government of Prime Minister Salim el Hoss, based in West Beirut. Needless to say, the Maronite Christian community is also deeply and bitterly split between the supporters of General Aoun and the supporters of Samir Geagea, the charismatic leader of the Lebanese Forces, a Maronite militia. Like the Syrians, Israelis, Americans and French before them, the Iraqis have clearly learnt not to place all their eggs in one

basket case, if you forgive the dreadful pun. According to recent reports, the Iraqis are also offering supplies to Mr Geagea's forces.

In response to the growing Iraqi presence in Lebanon, Iran has reportedly sent an additional 4000 to 8000 revolutionary guards to the Bekaa Valley as well as tightened her control over the Shia fundamentalist militia, the Hezbollah.

Clearly, the Iraqi — Irani build-up in Lebanon poses a range of challenges and dilemmas for Syria, Iraq's traditional adversary. Syria has responded to the Iraqi presence by reinforcing her estimated 30 to 40 000 troops stationed in West Beirut and the Bekaa. One Syrian fear is that Iraqi will be tempted to send troops to Lebanon on the pretext of buttressing Aoun's beleaguered government. It should be noted also that both Syria and Iraq receive most of their military equipment from the same source — the Soviet Union.

Furthermore, although Syria was perfectly willing to support Iran against her arch-rival Iraq in the war between them, she has no intention of permitting an increased Iranian influence inside Lebanon. To do so would greatly complicate Syria's bargaining position vis-a-vis Israel as well as challenge Syria's domineering stature inside Lebanon. Thus, Syria — not suprisingly — has stepped up her support to Hezbollah's main competitor for Shia loyalties, the AMAL, among other measures. How all of this will affect Lebanon in case of a resumption of the Iran-Iraq war is an open question.

If these testings and indirect confrontations provoke a certain alarm, by far the most dangerous manoeuvrings are taking place in southern Lebanon. It is here where the risk of miscalculation and the unpredictable could most easily spark off a new and escalating Arab — Israeli war. The Middle East's most embittered enemies are now compressed into this very small piece of Lebanese territory. It is here where the intricate triangle of opponents — the Syrians, Palestinians and Israelis — confront each other daily either directly or through Lebanese proxies and clients.

SOUTHERN LEBANON

Southern Lebanon is frequently described as a powder keg. Certainly it is located at the explosive centre of the strategic fault lines. Its eastern border is the Israeli annexed Golan Heights. Its centre forms the opening

to the Bekaa valley, the major route for an eventual ground invasion by Syrian troops or, possibly, Iranian revolutionary guards into Israel — or for the march of the Israeli Defence Forces into Syria. Its Mediterranean border is dotted by Palestinian refugee camps which contain reportedly an estimated 12 to 18 000 Palestinian fighters. Its main ports of Tyre and Sidon are prominent transit points for arms and drug smuggling. Moreover, the shadowy presence of Islamic militancy looms over the entire area. Into this area as well are compressed the complete array of Lebanon's contentious confessional groups — Maronite Christians, Druze, Shia and Sunni Muslims — in elaborate, precarious and shifting alliances with the outside forces that have made the area their own.

Exacerbating the destructive potential of the various conflicts played out in Lebanon is the new and threatening military balance that marks the region.

Probably the most alarming feature of the Iran-Iraq War was the use, by Iraq, of chemical weapons against sections of her own population and against Iran. Chemical weapons are weapons of mass destruction. The «poor man's nuclear bomb», they are cheap, easy to produce and their production is not impeded by the same stringent safeguards that apply to nuclear weapons. Very importantly, their deterrent functions seem, on the evidence so far available, to be very limited. Partly in response to Israel's nuclear capability, currently almost every country in the Middle East is either developing or has already developed a chemical weapons capacity. In addition, almost every country has obtained or is in the process of obtaining the short-range or, for instance in the case of Israel's Jerico II missile, the intermediate-range missiles required to deliver effectively these weapons onto neighbouring states. In short, if a new Arab-Israeli war should erupt, its military implications could be much more calamitous than the wars of previous occasions.

PEACEKEEPING

I should like to conclude this article on a somewhat less alarmist and more positive note. Therefore, a brief examination of the role of international peacekeeping in the area seems appropriate. I shall also suggest that peacekeeping is a theme which should be of more than passing interest to Portugal.

Despite the previous comments about southern Lebanon, since 1978 the area has been one of the most stable and, relatively speaking, non-violent parts of Lebanon. The main credit for this goes in large part to the presence of the United Nations Interim Forces in Lebanon, UNIFIL. From 1978 the resident population in UNIFIL's area of operations (A. O.) has increased from some 15 000 to over 400 000. UNIFIL A. O. becomes a sanctuary of refuge whenever violence flairs up in Beirut. Accompanying the growth in population has been a specular growth in economic prosperity to which the large expansion in the area's commercial and construction sectors bares witness.

Throughout its eleven year history UNIFIL has been much maligned and much criticized. But in general it has been criticized not for its failure to do what the Force was designed to do; but its failure to achieve that which the Force was never designed to do. For example, many Lebanese protested at UNIFIL's failure to halt Israel's 1982 invasion of the country. But UNIFIL was not created to fight Lebanon's wars for her. Israel has voiced strong objections to UNIFIL failure to take the Palestinian stronghold in Tyre, the famous «Tyre pocket». But again UNIFIL was not created to fight Israel's wars either. The international community has criticized UNIFIL for its inability to solve the underlying political conflicts in the area. But UNIFIL is not a *peacemaker*. This role must be entrusted to the politicians and diplomats of the states and political forces that are party to the conflict.

What UNIFIL is designed to do is to reduce violence, to manage conflict and to give the parties to the dispute breathing space and opportunity to pursue and, hopefully, resolve their disagreements through diplomatic means rather than through violent confrontation. A peacekeeping force is meant to operate as a confidence-building measure. It often provides the only face saving mechanism available for potential combatants to withdraw from the precipice.

In southern Lebanon the position of UNIFIL is often disheartening. Even modest sized militias can usually muster more fire power than the UN force. UNIFIL confronts the eagerly over-armed warriors of the South with light, defensive weaponry only. It is a predicament that particularly frustrates the professional military officers and men who form UNIFIL's backbone.

But normally — but by no means always — in a confrontation between the heavily armed local antagonists and UNIFIL, UNIFIL emerges the victor. The Force does not depend on heavy gauge weaponry, but on the weight of the international public opinion that backs it. In southern Lebanon UNIFIL operates as the moral and political conscience of the international community. Its withdrawal at this time would probably catalyse a complex and extremely vicious civil war in the area. The South would become largely depopulated and transformed into a free-fire zone. Despite Israel's assertions to the contrary, UNIFIL withdrawal would also significantly magnify the risk of direct Syrian-Israeli military confrontation.

Renewed super power detente and the changed international scene that has, thereby, developed has increased the relevance of peacekeeping. Because of detente, there is less propensity and less incentive for the great powers to indulge in direct, competitive involvement in Third World conflicts. Reversely, therefore, there are also fewer opportunities for contesting parties to develop client relations with the super powers with the accruing risk of super power contention. Because of their increased recognition of the limits of super power control, among other reasons, both the US and the USSR currently place emphasis on disengaging from and, thereby, reducing the escalatory potential of regional conflicts.

All this has led to an enhanced role for the United Nations in peacekeeping. Recently new peacekeeping operations have been launched in Namibia (UN Transition Assistance Group in Namibia, UNTAG), in Angola (UN Angola Verification Mission, UNAVEM), along the Iran-Iraq border (UN Iran-Iraq Military Observer Group, UNIIMOG) and in Afghanistan (UN Good Offices Mission in Afghanistan and Pakistan, UNGOMAP). In addition, five further missions are currently operative.

Needless to say, this dramatic expansion of the role of UN peacekeeping is accompanied by the need to expand the pool of peacekeepers, of those nations willing and able to contribute forces to peacekeeping operations. So finally we come to the role of Portugal.

The peacekeeping mission is a complex one. There is a need for a mix of industrialized and developing countries in order to reflect the world community at large and, thereby, truly represent international legitimacy. However, there is a particular need for small industrialized nations to provide a lead role. The reasons for this are many. To mention just two of the most salient. First, there exists a presumption that small countries

can operate with disinterest and neutrality in respect to the issues in conflict. They are viewed as having no vested stake in the conflict nor prior involvement with it. This requirement is essential to the political credibility of a peacekeeping operation and it normally does not obtain with regards to big powers. Second, there exists a presumption that industrial countries — unlike many developing ones — possess adequate levels of political, military and technical competence and training. This requirement is essential to the professional credibility of a peacekeeping force.

Peacekeeping requires unique qualities and is not an easy task. It requires highly refined and subtle skills in mediation and negotiation rather than the more straightforward capacity of enforcement. It involves the use of authority rather than the use of physical power; the symbolic moral power of the blue beret against the physical power of modern military weaponry. It involves assisting parties who prefer peace, but who cannot create it themselves. It involves assisting parties who cannot defend themselves and therefore cannot win and therefore require non-violence for their national security.

The benefits that a country, and in particular a small country, can derive from participation in peacekeeping are substantial. These benefits are both political and military in nature. Politically, peacekeeping helps shape and define a role for the country involved in international politics, enhancing the profile of the country as well as broadening the political horizons of her citizenry. It also provides opportunities and an distinct forum for direct participation in preserving international peace, a peace upon which small countries in particular are dependent.

Militarily, peacekeeping operations involve the testing and training of leadership and initiative, particularly among officers, which is otherwise difficult in peacetime armies. Peacekeeping operations are quite unlike military exercises that commence on Tuesday morning and are conveniently completed in time for Friday dinner. They also provide an opportunity for the development of tactics and the testing of new equipment under war conditions. They can be used for the realistic training of men. Thus, participation in peacekeeping can have significant multiplier effects boosting the quality of national standing armies. Finally, peacekeeping can give tasks and a concrete purpose to armies whose operational roles in peacetime are otherwise vague and difficult to define.

For these reasons, as well as others, participation in international peacekeeping operations is a proposition which Portugal should consider.

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