

The Tragedy of Lebanon

DEATH OF A COUNTRY*

(A Review Article)

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JOHN BULLOCH, correspondent of the Daily Telegraph was for several years a prominent member of the international press corps living in Beirut. This group of more than one hundred correspondents and cameramen attached to news agencies, radio and TV networks, and newspapers covered West Asia, moving to Cairo, Damascus, Baghdad, Teheran and even Tel Aviv reporting wars, coups, and assassinations in this turbulent part of the world. Anytime they returned to Beirut it was like withdrawing to a safe and secure place because though Beirut had its own brand of violence, the foreigners were generally left alone provided they did not interfere in local affairs or indulge in direct abuse of any friendly government. They therefore filed their despatches not from other capitals but from Beirut where there was no censorship in normal times and clearance of films and tapes was easy.

But this was not all. Hints and cues about the developments in any part of the Arab world from Casa Blanca to the Gulf could be easily picked in Beirut. It was a sounding board which not only the states in the region but even other nations used. Politicians banished from countries of the region generally took shelter here and as someone once remarked in an emergency one could gather enough people in Beirut with sufficient experience to form new governments in several Arab countries. Banished political leaders, commercial travellers, businessmen, and undercover agents provided valuable tips. Beirut was both a sounding board and a whispering gallery. Useful information had to be sifted from the planted rumours in its pubs, restaurants, clubs and hotels, which were an inseparable part of the life of the Lebanese capital which it was often referred to as the commercial

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capital of West Asia. It was equally well-known net and produced not a synthesis but an amalgam, where life was sophisticated but not fully Westernised, living was costly but not frightfully expensive, domestic help was still available, the call of the *muezzin* calling the faithful for prayers was heard from loudspeakers fitted on mosques and yet alcohol and pork were freely sold, the Sunday morning service in churches was popular but not obligatory, and hot pants and the Braless look existed peacefully with the *Chadder* (burqa) as did suits of the latest style from Paris with the Arab *Jalabieh*.

This was possible because over the centuries, Lebanon had evolved an ethos typically its own. The Maronite Christians who fled Turkey to escape oppression by the Greek Orthodox Church had taken refuge in the mountains of Lebanon and had come to live peacefully with the Muslims. One could find in Lebanon followers of almost every Christian sect—Maronite, Roman Catholic, Protestant, Greek Orthodox and Armenian. There were of course the Sunni, the Shia and the Druze, an esoteric sect, outwardly Muslim but having rites and ceremonies of its own, which in many respects ran counter to the teachings of orthodox Islam. There were even Jews, mostly concentrated in a crowded part of Beirut.

All these communities lived peacefully at the centre of the vertex of violence in West Asia, almost unmindful of the wars around, spinning money and seeking pleasure. The Government had perfected the art of governing by least interference, taking part in Intra-Arab affairs and yet avoiding extreme positions. It was a tight rope walk for the country and its government, made possible by the fact that not only the super powers but also neighbouring Arab countries needed Lebanon. The United States, its traditional friend, found Lebanon useful for its diplomatic and other activities, as it had to close its embassies in Cairo and Damascus. The Soviet Union found Lebanon a useful place to watch developments in Israel. The nations of the Gulf found Lebanon useful as a holiday resort where they could enjoy life away from the prying eyes at home. What was more important, Beirut with its one hundred banks offered opportunities for investment. The investment was indirect insurance against a rainy day. The deposits in banks tripled during a single calendar year and many nations raised quick loans at a high rate of interest but without the rigorous procedures and the publicity involved in operations through international institutions or government to government deals. The deposits with the banks were reflected in the spiral of inflation and the soaring skyscrapers which sprouted all over Beirut without any thought to the beauty of the landscape or even to simple

problems of ingress or outgress or ancillary facilities like water and power supplies. Most of the buildings were owned by people from the oil-rich countries. They were not worried about immediate returns on their investment because they had more cash than they could use. The multi-storeyed buildings were there as an investment and the owners did not care if most apartments remained vacant. Rents like prices also rose and the worst sufferers were the poor because the rich were getting richer. There was therefore an atmosphere of prosperity and plenty in Lebanon. Myriad lights glittered in the Casine de Liban, 30 kms from Beirut and in the night clubs and night bars in Phoenicia Street and elsewhere in the city, business was brisk, building activity was at its peak, transport and other services were fetching the country substantial resources and in the midst of the turmoil in West Asia, Lebanon seemed a land of peace.

The civil war in the middle of the seventies destroyed Lebanese economy and brought about a virtual division of the country. Lebanon has not yet recovered from the nightmare and it seems as if it may not do so for years to come. Nearly 50,000 people were killed in the fighting and some 2,00,000 injured, even by conservative estimates. There can be no correct estimate of the property destroyed though a large part of Beirut including the commercial centre has been reduced to a shambles. Tripoli, Sidon and Tyre, the other main cities also suffered and so did the countryside.

What were the causes which led to the destruction of this fine delicate mosaic created with so much diligence, patience and accommodation over the centuries? The answer lies in the description itself. The Lebanese political and economic structure was much too delicate to withstand the stresses and strains to which it was being subjected to because of the political situation in the region. Every Arab-Israeli conflict was invariably followed by a flare up in Lebanon and if the October 1973 war changed the political picture of the region drastically, the backlash in Lebanon was bound to be equally sweeping. Like the events which led to the larger conflict, forces had been building up within Lebanon for several years which made a clash on an unprecedented scale inevitable

Bulloch's book (*Death of a Country*) devotes only two of its twelve chapters to the causes which led to the conflict. The others are devoted to a description of the fighting in Beirut and the countryside, the position of the Palestinians, the involvement of the Syrians, and the uneasy peace which was in the end enforced on the country. Since the root causes had not been tackled, the peace is proving

untenable, the peace-keeping force is facing a difficult task and a return to normalcy remains a distant dream still. Bulloch's handling of the subject is that of a person who lived through the nightmare of the civil war and was more concerned with the events as they happened rather than with the causes behind them.

What were these reasons? The foremost of these was of course the political structure which laid down that the ratio between the Christians and the Muslims was as six is to five. This ratio was considered unreal forty years ago when it was first accepted. Changes in the population of the two main communities, Christians and Muslims, large-scale migration of the Christians to America, Europe and Australia and the influx of refugees from neighbouring countries had destroyed what validity it originally had. What was needed was a restructuring of the political system so as to bring it nearer to reality. But this was precisely what the ruling elite did not want. Under the present system, the President had to be a Maronite Christian, the Speaker of the National Assembly a Shia, the Prime Minister a Sunni. The other sects were also assured of at least one senior office. If the Muslims felt that they were in a majority, among the Muslims, the Shias claimed to be in a majority. No one could prove or disprove these claims because there had never been a census and the Christians claimed that in deciding this question it was not merely the Lebanese living in the country but also those who had migrated to other countries and held dual passports, should be taken into account. Since an overwhelming majority of the Lebanese settled abroad were Christians they would have supported continuance of the status quo which benefited the Christians and among them the Maronites more than the others, then the Sunni Muslims particularly the richer ones but not the Shias who were generally poorer than the others.

The constitution of Lebanon stood in the way of the growth of political parties with well-defined ideologies. Almost all the constituencies were multiple member constituencies with seats reserved not only for the different communities but also sub-sects based on their population there. The candidates therefore formed tickets. Thus in a three-member constituency which, for example, had to return a Maronite Christian, Sunni Muslim and a Druze member candidates from the three different constituencies would club together after assessing their strength and approach the electorate seeking votes for common ticket. It was not uncommon therefore to see candidates of two parties on a common ticket in one constituency while in the neighbouring constituency they would be on opposing tickets. There was naturally no

approach to ideology or programme and the election was reduced to a process of arriving at marriages of convenience entered into only with the immediate gain in view and dissolved soon after. The politics of the country therefore centred not round political parties but round personalities. Lebanon was the only country where top offices were shared by some twenty families—the Chamouns, Franjiehs, Gaymels among the Christians, the Salams, Solhs, and Karamis among the Muslims and the Jumblatts and the Marslans among the Druze to name only a few. Needless to say they were all prosperous and could afford the costly game that politics had become. The system therefore gave rise to two contradictions. Firstly, the election of a President or Prime Minister depended not on his ability or acceptability to the nation but his birth. A popular leader like Kamal Jumblatt, a Druze, could never become the President or the Prime Minister. Secondly, even among these communities, the less affluent had even less chance of making a mark in political life than elsewhere in the world.

Lebanon was thus living in a world of its own making in a part of the world which was torn by bitter Arab-Israeli hostility which had already caused three armed conflicts, till the early seventies and inter-Arab feuds. These feuds were only slightly less bitter than the Arab-Israeli hostility with a slow polarisation between the conservative governments like Saudi Arabia on the one side and what were often called radical nations like Iraq and South Yemen on the other. President Sadat stood almost in the middle, depending on the conservative governments for financial support as he did on the mercurial Col Kadaffi of Libya but also friendly with the radical governments because he had a treaty of friendship with the Soviet Union and depended on her for the hardware needed for his armed forces. All this found its echo in the political life of Lebanon, which was already beset with problems of her own—an outmoded political system, growing economic disparity between the poor, who were predominantly Muslims and ruling elite in which the Christians occupied the prominent place.

Conditions were already critical by the time the Arabs and Israel went to war for the fourth time in October 1973. During these years and more particularly in the yearly seventies, a new element had been introduced—the Palestinians. After every Arab-Israel war, more and more refugees came to Lebanon from territories occupied by Israel and their number rose to nearly 3,00,000 in 1973. Most of them live in 16 refugee camps, three of which are in the neighbourhood of Beirut and the rest in the countryside.

The relations between the Palestinians and the Lebanese were cordial in the beginning when the anti-Israel feeling was at its peak and the Palestinians were considered as brothers seeking refuge from persecution by the common enemy of the Arabs. The Muslims who were for greater identification of Lebanon with the Arab cause were more well disposed towards the Palestinians than the Christians.

After the 1967 conflict a new element—the Palestinian Commandos—came into play. Humiliated on the battle-field in 1967, the Arabs looked upon the Commandos as an expression of their spirit to fight Israelis. It was even felt that the Commandos could do what the Arab government could not, humiliate Israel if not on the battle-field at least by their attacks which caught the imagination of the common people.

But soon the Commandos became a source of embarrassment to Arab governments particularly because of the hijackings and the raids carried out by splinter groups. Most Arab countries were prepared to give moral support to Commando activities as a legitimate expression of the Palestinians resolve to fight and even to finance them. But were not prepared to allow them to operate within their own territory. The two exceptions were Lebanon and Jordan. Till they were exterminated from there by King Hussain's army in 1971, the Palestinian Commandos virtually controlled the east bank of the Jordan River. In Lebanon, they took over full control of the refugee camps and any attempt by the Lebanese government to enforce its rule within these camps failed. After King Hussain of Jordan exterminated the Commandos from his country in a series of military operations in 1970 and 1971, they moved into Lebanon, controlling the areas bordering Lebanon in the south. Clashes with Lebanese authority became more frequent, so did the raids on Israel from South Lebanon. Inevitably, Israeli reprisals also mounted and since rockets, bombs and shells make no distinction of nationality among the victims, the Lebanese suffered as much as the Palestinians.

The Christians of Lebanon had not taken kindly to the large influx of Palestinians and even less to the control that they exercised over part of Lebanon's territory. They were quick to point out that this was loss of Lebanese sovereignty. Israel also carried out a relentless propaganda that she was 'compelled' to carry out raids of reprisal in South Lebanon because of the Palestinian Commandos there and if the Lebanese suffered in these raids, it was not Israel but the Commandos who were to blame. This propaganda also had its effect in souring the relations between the Palestinians and the Lebanese. The lightning Israeli raid on Beirut in which three

Commando leaders were killed further soured the relationship as the Palestinians openly alleged that the Lebanese government had done nothing to fight the raiders. Some Palestinians even went to the extent of alleging collusion between the Israelis and the Maronite dominated Lebanese army. The raid caused a political crisis and the Prime Minister Mr. Saeb Salam resigned as President Franjeh refused to take any action against the army commander, a Maronite Christian.

After the Arab-Israeli war of 1973, Egypt swerved towards the USA. With Cairo, Alexandria and Damascus once again open to the Americans, Beirut lost its utility as a listening post. The prosperity aroused jealousy. Why should Beirut be the commercial capital of West Asia and not Teheran or Kuwait. And why should goods meant for the Gulf Countries be unloaded at Beirut Port and not at Latakia in Syria? In any case, reopening of the Suez Canal had reduced the land route to secondary importance. Unfortunately, while the country's position was threatened by external factors, conditions within Lebanon were also becoming critical. The tension between the Palestinians and the Lebanese, particularly the Christians had reached a peak, and the mounting deposits in the banks exercised an inflationary pressure on the prices which affected the poor most. The personality of President Suleiman Franjeh was also such that he did not receive the universal support that a Head of State enjoys. Conditions were ripe for a flare-up but no one ever imagined that it would take the form of a regular civil war and leave the country crippled, with a peace-keeping force largely composed of Syrians on its soil, the Christians trying to carve out an independent State of their own and Central authority practically non-existent.

John Bulloch has not analysed the factors which led to this civil war in as much detail as one would expect from him. Even about the war his account is largely limited to the Battle of Kantari in Beirut and the Battle for hotels—Holiday Inn, Phoenicia and St. George. This failure is understandable because even if correspondents had dared to move out of their area at the risk of their lives, it would have been impossible for them to do so. The description of these battles is very graphic. What happened in the rest of the country is mentioned but this is not based on first-hand observation.

Bulloch has however given a graphic account of the interplay of politics which influenced the course of the civil war and ultimately brought it to an end. The alliance of the Palestinians and the Lebanese left at one time seemed to be winning the civil war, as it was

backed by neighbouring Syria. He has analysed the factors which led to a cooling off between the partners and the withdrawal of Syrian support which robbed it of a certain victory. The motive was clear, Syria wanted a change in the political system in Lebanon but not a change so drastic as to leave a Lebanese Left-Palestinian alliance in complete control. It therefore opted for a policy where the Christians were able to carve out an enclave of their own, the alliance controlled the rest of the country and both looked for their survival to the 30,000 strong predominantly Syrian peace-keeping force.

Taking a short-range view, this policy seems to have succeeded. But the presence of a foreign army on its soil unites a nation as nothing else can. In the years since this uneasy peace has been imposed on Lebanon, there are already signs of a new awakening among the Lebanese youth. The Lebanese claim descent from the Phoenicians named after the Phoenix. This legendary bird is said to have the boon of rising from its own ashes. During its long and chequered history, Beirut and Lebanon have been destroyed many times only to rise again from its ruin. "The Death of a Country" as one sees it today may be only the prelude to its rebirth from the ashes of its old form, rid of the contradictions which brought about its end;