

The Lebanon and its Role in the Middle East

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The question that now arises is whether Lebanon, which until only recently has been the centre of a great deal of madness, is now in a position to play a role in establishing peace. Have the Lebanese truly drawn the lessons to be learned from the war that ravaged their country? Or is the peace that they are currently enjoying no more than a respite that has been forced upon them, a drawn-out ceasefire that is merely an interlude between the violence of yesterday and that of tomorrow? Have the war and the suffering it engendered served as a maturing experience, or will the Lebanese never be able to fully shake off the exaggerated sense of identity, existential questions and their constantly repeated anguish?

Beirut, like Barcelona, Sarajevo, Salonika, Istanbul and Alexandria, is one of the so-called «world cities», as Edgar Morin terms them – the melting pots of Mediterranean culture, the witnesses of human experiences that have marked the last century. In their own way, each of these cities expresses the sensibility that is characteristic of the Mediterranean, a sensibility that reflects the same light and the same art of living. They often share the same approaches to life and death, family values, music and food. Our cities vibrate to similar rhythms. Whereas cities bordering on oceans are governed by the cosmic rhythms of the tides and the moon, our cities border on a lake with virtually no tides, and where the cyclical life of the sun is more important.

But this sea of encounter is en route to becoming the sea of rupture, surrounded as it is by serious conflicts, in the Middle East and the Balkans, which will weigh heavy on our future because they bring violence, religious segregation, ethnic cleansing and national wars that will leave none of us untouched. The choice we face today is a radical choice between peaceful co-existence and barbarism; between acceptance of others and their violent exclusion; between life and death.

War has made the Lebanese aware of a common destiny that serves to unite their country. But there are two sides to this destiny:

- One side comes from decline and fragility: the Lebanese are all accomplices in one respect or another in a collective massacre, that of their society, which they sacrificed because it was no longer capable of bringing them together and had instead become an arena for the rivalries between individuals, groups and communities, all of them wanting to take the others' places and believing they were seeking their rightful due.
- But the other side is that of openness and vision: the high style of civilisation that the Lebanese had constructed prior to the war; the climate of freedom that reigned in Lebanon at a time when the Arab world was swinging between backward traditionalism and revolutionary totalitarianism; its openness to the world and its ability to integrate the new without losing itself, today make this historic experience a model that needs to be revived, a model not just for Lebanon but for the

entire Arab world that finds itself in the throes of upheaval, which run the risk of degenerating at any moment into a cycle of generalised violence.

How might Lebanon contribute to the search for a peaceful future in the Middle East?

1. Firstly, it could play an essential role in the search for an Arab path to modernity in order to break away from the sterile cycle of sudden leaps forward and steps backward in which the Arab world is today engaged. The problem that must now be faced within this sphere is that of how to ensure the emergence of the individual and individual autonomy without reducing society in the process to an agglomeration of individuals and breaking the ties and bonds that connect them with their environment.
2. Lebanon can also make a significant contribution to the battle for democracy that is now being waged in the Arab world. This battle has reached new heights, following the fall of Baghdad, which has been the equivalent in the Arab world of the fall of the Berlin Wall. The same calls for freedom and justice are now heard everywhere, from Syria to the countries in the Gulf and including Jordan, Egypt and Saudi Arabia. These calls are expressed differently in each case, but are now making themselves heard in every discourse and in every demand. Lebanon is in a position to assist decisively thanks to its practical experience of democracy, and also to its universities, publishing houses, press and media, hospitals, banks, previous diaspora, and so forth.

LEBANON: CROSSROADS OF THE MEDITERRANEAN

The period from 2002 to 2003 has been another year of upheaval for the Middle East, highlighted this time by two landmark events: the crisis of the Arab-Israeli conflict and the entry of the British-American coalition troops in Baghdad. These two events, apart from marking the future of the region, have triggered a series of chain reactions, and at their epicentre, straddling the two conflicts, we find Lebanon.

Although not free from tensions, and in spite of the continual pressures it is subject to from both inside and outside the country, Lebanon has managed to remain in one piece. Actually, in the country, external and internal factors are so intertwined that sometimes it is very difficult to distinguish one from the other, and to identify the specific causes of a problem in their natural context. And one of the problems experienced by Lebanon is that everything that happens around the country is interpreted differently by each of its communities, a confusion that often leads to intercommunity conflicts.

Currently, the former Switzerland of the Middle East continues to labour under the economic consequences of the devastation caused by the civil war, and the challenges implied by its reconstruction, as well as dealing with its position as a direct recipient of the consequences of the deadlock of the Arab-Israeli conflict. On 27th and 28th March 2002, Beirut hosted the Arab League summit, in which the Arab world collectively offered peace to Israel for the first time. A few days before that, about five hundred students demonstrated in the capital against the presence of Syrian troops in the country. The ensuing arrests and attacks on the media opposing Syrian intervention caused

concern among several human rights organisations and even led to a resolution from the European Parliament on 16th January 2003.

For economic reasons, and to regain its previous position on the international stage, Lebanon signed an Association Agreement with the EU in June 2002 and an Interim Agreement on trade and trade related matters, which came into force on 1st March 2003. This initiative, aimed at contributing to the reactivation of the Lebanese economy, was supplemented by the Paris II Donors Conference, held on 23rd November 2002, which managed to raise 4.4 billion dollars in funds in order to reduce the Lebanon's burdensome debt, which amounted to about thirty billion dollars.

As was concluded during the discussion sessions of the Week of Lebanon held in Barcelona from 12th to 18th December 2003*, in spite of the attempts to reinvigorate the Lebanese economy through reconstruction, promoting investment and privatising State-owned assets, among other measures, the country continues to remain immersed in an economic quagmire. The presence of Syrian troops and the neighbouring regime's influence on Lebanese politics are seen, from amongst dissenting voices, as one of the major impediments to the country's development.

Furthermore, the discrepancies existing within Lebanese society regarding the situation of the southern part of the country (regarding the activities of Hezbollah, mainly concentrated in the Shebaa Farms area), and the lack of clearly delimited borders between Lebanon and its neighbours, in addition to the disputes with Israel over the

area's major water resources, seem to have become entrenched, and offer little room for optimism. An illustrative example of this is the dispute triggered in October 2002 by the inauguration of a water pumping station built by Lebanon at the Wazzani Spring, near the border with Israel.

This situation is further complicated by the presence of about 400,000 Palestinian refugees in the country, whose status remains vague, and which pose a very thorny problem for Lebanon, to a greater or lesser degree, according to different opinions and given its inextricable link with the evolution of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

In spite of this undoubtedly complex panorama, there are signs of the revitalisation of the country's political and economic agenda, one of which is Lebanon's intention to join the World Trade Organisation. Such revitalisation will undoubtedly require a renewed appreciation of those values that have been hallmarks of the country: its aptitude as an open and trading country; the ability to cope with social diversity; its long-standing traditions of culture, education and freedom of speech; and its democratic track record which could perhaps be extended to the other countries in the region. All these characteristics must grow in a rather hostile environment in which, according to some opinions, clientelism is confused with political «confessionalism»; and in which enormous effort will be required to overcome past traumas, present obstacles and future fears.

(*) For further information, see: <http://www.iemed.org/activitats/2003/liban/aliban.php>

In order to be adept in this role, which has been theirs ever since the Renaissance, the Lebanese also need to be able to assume their national responsibilities without interference from anyone. At this point, they come up against the major obstacle of the Syrian military presence in Lebanon, which imposes on the Lebanese a political power that is not of their choosing, while increasing its all-encompassing manipulation with a view to annihilating every form of opposition. Lifting this obstacle requires the imple-

mentation of the Taif Accord (1989), which put an end to the war, and which allowed for the deployment of the Syrian army in the Bekaa Valley bordering on Syria (which should have been ended in September 1992), in readiness for its withdrawal from Lebanon. The process would then continue with the organisation of legislative elections founded on a non-partisan electoral law. However, the terms of this accord have not been respected. Our relations with Syria, which are today the subject of a huge dispute,

need to be restored to normal, but this will be impossible until such time as Syria proceeds with the changes required for it to adapt to the modern world. If the relations between the two countries are really to become «favoured», as the Taif Accord stipulates, this would presuppose not only Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon, but also the free circulation of goods, people and capital, the opening up of the economy, the adoption of balanced rules on trade, the possibility of reliable recourse to justice, and other similar changes.

3. Finally, Lebanon can make an invaluable contribution to the development of a culture of peace by:

- Rejecting the reductionism that has been the source of all the madness, and the incentive that has reduced civilisation to culture, culture to religion, religion to politics and politics to violent action.
- Making the most, as have the signatories of the Geneva Pact, of the fatigue and lassitude arising from long years of violence in order to

bring the values of openness and tolerance, without which life cannot be re-established, back to the foreground.

- Re-launching on political and cultural bases the Muslim-Christian dialogue in order to prevent the feared «clash of civilisations» that would lead to a permanent destabilisation of the Middle East, and that would also threaten the stability of Europe, whose fate is henceforth linked to that of the countries on the southern shore of the Mediterranean.

To conclude, it would be useful to reflect on the conditions that have allowed an easy transition to take place in most East European countries, and to perhaps envision an initiative of the same type as that defined by the Helsinki Accords, with a view this time to organising the security of the Mediterranean and cooperation in the region on the basis of the principles of democracy and justice, by putting an end to the policy of «two weights: two measures» that has contributed enormously to angering Arabs and their rejection of the West.