

Chance for a federation

cal advantage. In short, confessional Lebanon is not ready for secularization.

Enter Egypt

The process of conflict resolution has not been limited to the Lebanese initiatives outlined above. Instead, developments within Lebanon also have drawn in, and then defied, all those who attempted to "help," namely, Egypt, Israel and Syria. Each of these countries has played its role in intra-Lebanese politics, each has manipulated the strife in ways they thought would serve their interest, and each has decided to solve the crisis on its own terms.

With the rise of pan-Arabism in the mid-1950s, Egypt emerged as a key player on the Lebanese political scene and served as a "catalyst" in that country's body politic. Between 1958 and 1970 the Egyptian ambassador in Beirut reportedly acted as a high commissioner who intervened in the details of the Lebanese political process to keep the country strictly in line with Nasser's policies. This was manifested clearly by the Cairo Agreement which was brokered by Nasser and signed by the government of Lebanon and the PLO on October 3, 1969. Although this was intended to accommodate Lebanese autonomy with Palestinian interests, in reality it was an unwarranted violation of the former's sovereignty. In effect, the accord legitimized the Palestinian military presence and allowed the Resistance to use Lebanese territory for commando activities against Israel. Worse still, it permitted the PLO to exercise a certain extraterritorial right over the refugee camps.

In retrospect, the agreement did little to protect Lebanon's interests. Rather, it injected the PLO as a destabilizing element into the country's delicate internal equilibrium and polarized the Lebanese along confessional lines. Moreover, since the PLO behaved as though the road to Palestine led through Beirut, the Christians became convinced that their prerogatives could not be preserved without terminating the terms of the Cairo Agreement and eradicating the PLO military presence. This required abandoning the Egyptian initiative and opting instead for collaboration with the Israelis, especially during and after their invasion of Lebanon in 1982.

Enter Israel

In the absence of national or Arab military forces, President Amin Gemayel became convinced that negotiations with Israel were the only available way to secure his state's liberation. So on May 17, 1983, the Lebanese negotiator signed the first accord between the two countries since 1948. The accord, which was brokered by the United States, called for normalizing relations between Tel Aviv and Beirut, a complete Israeli withdrawal and the establishment of a Joint Liaison Committee to inspect security measures along the Israeli-Lebanese frontier. In retrospect, it also provided additional Arab recognition of the legitimacy of Israel's existence and so secured the disengagement of Lebanon from the Arab-Israeli conflict. In this way the agreement met Israel's overriding demand for the security of its northern settlements. Nevertheless, optimism over the implementation of the accord was shattered quickly when Israel refused to withdraw unless the Syrians did so simultaneously — a measure Damascus has simply ignored.

Enter Syria

The Syrians naturally denounced the Accord of May 17, on the basis that it infringed on Lebanese sovereignty, turned the

country into an Israeli protectorate and rewarded Israel for its invasion. In essence, the agreement confirmed Syrian President Assad's belief that his country must retain its influence over Lebanon and also must prevent Israel from establishing or retaining any form of hold there. To this end, Syria gathered its Lebanese allies into the so-called National Salvation Front, which encompassed Walid Jumblatt (a Druze), Nabih Barri (a Shiite), Rashid Karami (a Sunni) and Slieman Franjeh (a Maronite). This body's basic aim was to force the abandonment of the Accord. Such a polarization of forces left President Gemayel in an untenable position. He could not ratify the Accord and expect Lebanon to remain united, but he could not reject it and expect full support from the Israelis and the Christian forces. Yet as assaults by Syrian-backed militias on the Lebanese government increased, President Gemayel made the difficult decision to drop the Accord on February 23, 1984. As he stated it, the rationale was as follows: "When negotiating with Israel was the only imperative option to regain the land, we did not hesitate before this option, and when the abrogation of the May 17 Agreement became the only imperative option to unite the people, we did not hesitate to abrogate." Implicit in this explanation was recognition of the fact that the "Israelization" of Lebanon had failed and that Syria now had a key role in shaping the country's future.

Even so, the failure of the Lebanese-Israeli Accord neither enhanced national unity nor convinced Syria to withdraw its troops. Instead, Syria continued its policy of "freezing the conflict" by opposing the emergence of any single, strongly-based local force in Lebanon. By maintaining the fragility of the intra-Lebanese balance, Syria hoped to become an indispensable factor in Lebanese affairs and to begin slowly "digesting" Lebanon. This became clear on December 28, 1985, when the Christian forces (headed by Elie Hobeika), the Druze (represented by Walid Jumblatt) and the Shiites (led by Nabih Barri) signed the Tripartite Agreement in Damascus. *Inter alia*, this agreement represented a trade-off between Syrian hegemony and Lebanon's internal peace. It stipulated the "Syrianization" of Lebanon in military, economic and education aspects as well as in foreign affairs. But this accord, too, was never ratified. President Gemayel rejected its terms, and on January 15, 1985, Elie Hobeika was replaced by Samir Geagea — an enemy of Syria — as the head of Christian militia. Since then sporadic fighting, car bombs, kidnappings and the shelling of residential areas have become daily rituals.

A way to hope

Optimism about a peaceful solution to the Lebanese crisis can be seen along the following lines: although the Lebanese criticize each other and their political system, they all seek to preserve Lebanon while changing it. The evidence suggests that the highest shared value among Lebanese communities is the belief in preserving the country's independence, unity and territorial integrity. All have rejected, although interchangeably, that state's balkanization or its incorporation into another state. All agree as well in viewing the present system as an inaccurate reflection of the interests, expectations and aspirations of all Lebanese. It thus seems that any formula designed to restore peace must recognize the fundamental crisis of identity, the sectarian divisions, the Arab-Israeli conflict and the various external challenges to sovereignty. To this end, federalism seems to be the only conceivable solution which could encompass Lebanon's interests, and set the country on the road to peace.