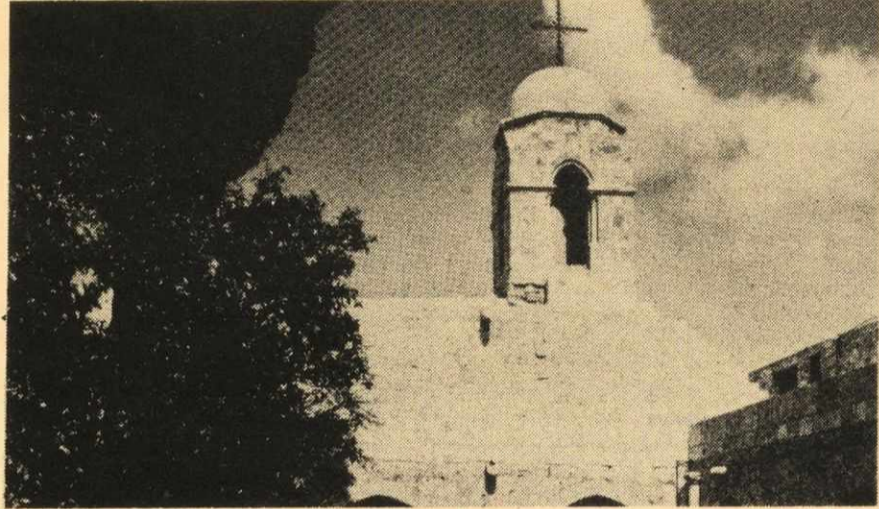


# Lebanon between Right and Left

by Rose Obeid

Lebanon is a land of immigrants, a refuge for the oppressed, the disconted, the non-conformest, and the heretics. Expatriated communities, non-conformist Moslems, and displeased Christians have found in the mountains the security denied them on the plain. They flourish there as Maronites, Druzes, Shiites, Matawilah, till the present day. Because Lebanon has been a refuge spot for different groups, it has suffered from political disunity and internal strife - religious, ethnic or both.

Islam, as a religion, was tolerant



of the Christians and Jews, but tolerance most definitely did not mean equality. The Moslems felt that Islam was superior to any other religion, and acted superior to the Christians and Jews among them. Despite periods of greater toleration and congeniality, the various sects of Christians and Jews, as well as Heterodox Moslems, in inferior communities, were merely allowed to exist within the Moslem states. After the Moslem state had been established, it actively pursued the spread of Islam and the Arabic language, and the Christians and other religious minorities began to feel the threat to their very existence as separate entities.

The only area that offered any lasting resistance was Lebanon. It retained the Christian Maronite faith and Syriac language for centuries after the Islamization and Arabicization of the entire area. Maronites were well entrenched in the North, but apart from occasional banding together to repulse an outside attack they remained fairly weak. The Maronites union with Rome gave Lebanon its western orientation which became an important element in the country's recent history and present political developments. Up to this day Christian Lebanon was willing to admit little more than Lebanon's Arab character and proclaimed that Lebanon's national interest was above any Arab interest.

Moslem Lebanon is anxious to stress the country's Arab character and heritage and denounces Lebanon's image in the outside world as a "Christian" country. The Moslems have also repeatedly brought up for discussion the unwritten part of the National Pact. Their complaint is that the Moslems are not adequately and fairly represented in parliament and government offices. They have demanded a census be taken to exact the number of Christians and Moslems in the country. In the proposed census, they would exclude all emigrant Lebanese but seek to include the more than 300,000 Palestine Refugees, predominantly Moslems and some Kurdish Moslem Tribes, all of whom have not been granted Lebanese citizenship. It may be difficult for a North American to

understand the strong emphasis upon religious and sectarian issues in the middle east. There, religion penetrates every facet of a person's life.

The situation becomes even worse when there are a number of signs that distinguish Christians from Moslems. Foreign education and bi- or tri-lingualism on the part of Lebanese, is a pretty good indicator that he is a Christian. If he does care to use Arabic, but is proud of his French, it is almost certain that he is a Maronite. There are strictly Moslem names, strictly Christian names and few common to both.

Not only do the Christians and Moslems have different educational backgrounds, they do not share the same mores or moral standards. Moslems do not allow the mixing of the sexes to the extent Christian Lebanese do. Christian marriages are different than that of Moslems. Both Christians and Moslems are quite aware of the differences and each side views the other as backward. This situation produces a certain degree of aloofness on both sides, and thus a lack of interaction between the two parties is inevitable.

To take you back further into Lebanon's history I would say that tension between Moslems and Christians is an old disease. In the year 1914 there was considerable tension between Moslems and Christian quarters in Beirut. When the Ottomans withdrew Lebanon came under French military occupation and then under French Mandate. Most Sunni Moslems were loyal to the idea of an Arab Nation and an Arab Syria state. Lots of conflicts were created. The first President in Lebanon was not a Maronite but an Orthodox Christian. When Lebanon obtained its independence in 1943, the first Maronite President was elected. Election of a Maronite president was agreeable to both Christians and Moslems.

Lebanese Christians, in general, are more concerned than are Moslems about the Lebanese political system and are motivated by purely Lebanese considerations. This can be understood from the fact that the Christian Sectarian Parties and parliamentary blocks, such as the Kkatetb, Les Phalanges Libanais, the National Block, the Constitutionalist, and the Liberal Nationalist have a much larger membership than the other organizations such as the Baath, the Arab Nationalist, and the Communist. The latter, because of their political ideologies and intentions, have remained minority parties. Their failure to win a substantial number of seats in national elections was a proof that the tradition oriented voters were not yet ready to give up their traditional integration.

On the other hand, because of the influence of Christian population, Lebanon stands neutral toward the

Arab-Israel war, it also displays marked western tendencies by which it is chiefly distinguished. Thus, Lebanon presents a striking contrast to the general pattern of westernization in the Arab Middle East. Lebanon has always been an exception in the Afro-Asian world, its Christian society tends to be culturally and socially homogeneous. Although in this Christian society a certain amount of inequality exists, wealth appears to be evenly distributed among large middle class that has steadily grown with the spread of education and economic opportunity. The educated in the Christian Lebanon serve as a link between the various sections of society; in doing so they promote a unity of purpose among all classes. As a Christian country, Lebanon is culturally dependant on Europe.

In so far as it is Moslem, the case is different, the Moslem Lebanese do not share the same attachment of their Christian compatriots to the west. Their cultural affinity is principally to the Middle East. Thus the social structure of the two communities is not the same. For instance, in Beirut, as in other towns, a number of Moslem families maintain traditions of urban refinement which are often beyond the capacity and experience of peasant Christians. The ordinary Moslem quarters in Beirut, Tripoli or Akkar, resemble their counterparts elsewhere in the middle east. Village life in the Muslim parts of Bekaa in the south of Lebanon, as in most other Middle eastern or Afro-Asian societies, a wide gap separates the rich from the poor. Conscious of their Arab cultural affinities, Lebanese Moslems are generally Arab Nationalist, keenly interested in the promotion of Pan-Arab power. So great is their interest in the problem of their immediate society.

In the rest of the Middle East which is predominantly Moslem, no true democracy exists. In Latin America underdeveloped states which are Christian are frequently dictatorships. Because Lebanon is in the Middle East, the Christian Lebanese persist in maintaining their liberal traditions. However, the internal and external circumstances that contributed some success to Lebanon Democracy, do also prevent it from achieving complete stability and harmony. The Christian-Moslem Dualism which protects the Lebanese people from Despotic rules at the same time divides their ranks and produces sectarian conflicts.

Arab Nationalism suggests to Moslems and even to some Lebanese Christian masses, a Pan-Arab socialism as an answer to their grievance. Thus the attachment of these masses to Lebanon is weak. Their Lebanese "feelings" are naturally not as strong as that of the rightest Christian. The Leftist feels the resentment of neglect, socially

and economically, they are unprepared to appreciate the virtues of the Liberal way of life. For all these reasons they are attracted easily to Pan-Arab propaganda and are reinforced by various Arab means.

Had Lebanon been a predominantly Moslem country it might not have been much different from the rest of the Middle East. Should it be led by Leftist, the Rightest fears that Lebanon Policy will definitely be changed and Lebanon might have to participate in the complicated Arab-Israeli war. The Christians also fear that they will be exterminated (they almost are), and their influence in the country may be diminished.

Lebanon has three distinguished traits; freedom, political realism, and the ability to accept western culture without inhibition. These traits characterize the country, first because of its particular religious composition and status in the Middle East; second, because the country has been led, at a critical period of its social and cultural development by its western-oriented Christian elements. Lebanon champions free economy and capitalistic enterprise. It is the only country in the Arab world that has no Nomadic Bedouins, no desert, and can boast of a large proportion of free holding cultivators. It has the highest standard of living and is definitely the Arab country with the greatest protection of civil rights and the freedom of worship, speech and assembly, also the literacy rate in Lebanon is the highest in the Arab world.

Paris de Moyen Orient or Paris of the Middle East is nearly becoming the wasteland of the Middle East, torn apart by confused political leaders that refuse to rationalize and compromise.

Political ideologies and cultural perspectives separate right from left, the Moslems from the Christians and vice versa. And Lebanon (I call it the "football") has been kicked around by right and left, Western and Eastern players who gamble on its existence.

Who will be the winner of the game? In my opinion, the game although destructive, it has not ended yet.

Each party has external supporters and sympathizers. The leftest has, if not all the Arab world support, most of it - Iraq, Lybia, Syria, and Palestinians. The rightest, at the moment, are supported by the Christian immigrants all over the world. If each of these supporters learns that charity begins at home, perhaps Lebanese Christians and Moslems would have been more rational and willing to discuss differences with better understanding, and Lebanon would not have suffocated from the squeeze between left and right who have refused to see that survival is in the air of peace and tolerance, and not among the flames of savagery and hatred.

