

Civil war in Lebanon: the anatomy of a crisis

By David Waines

Beirut was once envied as the Zurich of the Middle East. Today, its most viable and visible commercial enterprise is the arms trade. Once regarded as the playground of the Eastern Mediterranean, Beirut is now transformed into a bloody battlefield rivalling Saigon (or perhaps Warsaw) at the peak of its war-torn existence. Property destruction, torture, murder, rape, kidnapping, looting and vengeance only partially catalogue the terrors of daily life. Beirut today is a ravaged city; Lebanon, a country divided against itself, performs the grotesque and savage ritual of apparent mass suicide.

Foreign observers are not alone in asking how matters have come to this pass. Many Lebanese also gaze in horror — many in shame — at the spectacle. Yet few have recognized that Lebanon 1975 is not merely a local conflagration. The possible international repercussions of the crisis itself, so far only acknowledged in silence by most Western and Arab governments, make it the most explosive since the first Palestine war in 1948.

Like rumours of fear, theories explaining the current chaos are legion; their common element is that some "conspiracy" exists. The conspiracy theories differ only as to who is plotting what against whom. Separately, each contains a grain of plausibility. Collectively, the conspiracy theories reflect both the legacy of the past and the fears and frustrations arising from

Dr. Waines is a Canadian living and teaching in Cairo. He is currently teaching at the Ain Shams University and has been visiting professor and assistant director of the Centre of Arabic Studies at the American University in Cairo. In 1975 he was in Canada teaching anthropology at Simon Fraser University. Dr. Waines is author of The Unholy War: Israel and Palestine, 1897-1971 and of numerous articles on the Middle East. The views expressed in this article are those of the author.

a complex of rapidly-changing current conditions. As a starting-point, therefore, one may observe that a general cause of the current civil war in Lebanon is the absence of the National Charter.

Britain and France

After the First World War, the two main Western powers, Britain and France, divided most of the Middle East between them, cloaking their imperial interests in rivalries in a system of League of Nations mandated territories. Britain (which had already occupied Egypt) received Palestine and Iraq, while France was given Syria and Lebanon. In Lebanon, during the 1920s, a constitution was drawn up according to which the country would be prepared for independence. Next, a formal unwritten agreement was reached whereby the political spoils of national independence would be divided in relation to the numerical size of the two main religious communities, Christian and Moslem. A referendum conducted by the French in 1932, the results of which are now considered to have served their cruder political interests) showed that the various Christian sects combined gave them a slight majority over the Moslems. The Christian Maronite sect, traditionally pro-French and Western, possessed the largest share of the *minority*. Hence, in the National Charter, parliamentary representation was fixed at a constant ratio of six Christians to five Moslems; the President of the Republic, the country's most powerful political figure, would be a Maronite Christian; the Prime Minister, a Sunni Moslem, and the Speaker of the Chamber of Deputies, a Shia Moslem.

The system was a delicately-balanced combination of several sectarian interests in which the Maronites were assumed to play a paramount political role. The same sectarian ratio was also applied to every important pointment for public office. More important was the army, where the commander-in-chief and many senior officer cadres were solidly Maronite. This sectarian (or

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