

The Crown and the Coals

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LEBANON IS in crisis. And what is new?

Since the founding of the state, 90 years ago, the word “crisis” has been inseparably linked with its name.

From the Israeli perspective, this crisis has a double significance.

First, it endangers the quiet on the Northern border. Every internal crisis in Lebanon can easily lead to a conflagration. Somebody in Lebanon may trigger a confrontation in order to divert attention from internal matters. Somebody in Israel may decide that that this is a good opportunity for advancing some Israeli scheme.

Lebanon War III, if it breaks out – God forbid! – threatens untold destruction on both sides. Lebanon War II will look, in comparison, like a picnic. This time, all Israeli towns and villages will be within range of Hezbollah’s rockets. During the big Carmel fire, a few weeks ago, it became clear that nothing has been prepared for the defense of the rear, besides an impressive arsenal of speeches and declarations.

But this Lebanese crisis is also significant on quite another level. It holds an important lesson concerning the existential question facing us now: Israel in its 1967 borders or a Greater Israel that will rule over all the land between the Mediterranean and the Jordan.

The Lebanese crisis calls out to us: Look, you have been warned!

THE LEBANESE malaise started with a crucial decision made on the very day the state was set up.

In Arab eyes, Lebanon is a part of Syria. Greater Syria – al-Sham in Arabic – includes the present state of Syria as well as Lebanon, Palestine, Jordan and Sinai. This is a basic tenet of modern Arab nationalism.

During the hundreds of years of Ottoman rule in the region, there were no real borders between these provinces. The administrative divisions changed from time to time, but were unimportant. One could travel from Haifa to Damascus or from Jerusalem to Beirut without encountering any problem.

Lebanon is a country of high mountain ranges, one of the most beautiful countries in the world. This topographical reality encouraged persecuted minorities from all over the region to look for refuge there. They established themselves between the mountains, organized for all-round defense, fiercely resolved to hold on to their special character. The very tolerant Ottoman rule gave each community far-reaching autonomy (the “millet” system).

Thus the Druze established themselves in the Chouf mountains, the Christian Maronite sect in the Central Mountains and the Shiites in the South. Next to them there were other Christian communities (mainly Greek Orthodox and Greek Catholics) and the Sunni Muslims. These last were concentrated mainly in the coastal towns – Tripoli, Beirut and Sidon – and not by

accident. The (Sunni) Ottomans put them there as guardians of their empire in face of all these diverse communities.

THE HISTORIC change in the annals of Lebanon occurred in 1860. Until then, the two main communities – the Maronites and the Druze – lived in strained co-existence. There were many clashes between them, and for some time, Druze princes established something resembling a mini-state in the region, but the relations between them were tolerable.

In 1860 the local conflicts escalated disastrously, and the Druze massacred the Christians. The Jews, too, were in danger, and the British Jew, Moses Montefiore, rushed to their aid in his coach. The world was shocked – that was a time when the world was still shocked by massacres – and the situation was exploited by the French, who had always cast covetous eyes on the “Levant”. The Istanbul government was compelled to recognize them as protector of the Christians in Lebanon. In order to defend the Christians, the Lebanese mountains were given an autonomous status within the Ottoman Empire, under French protection.

With the collapse of the Ottoman Empire at the end of World War I, the region was divided between the two victorious powers – Great Britain and France. In a cynical betrayal of their declared aim (“national self-determination”) the French took hold of Syria (including Lebanon), while the British took possession of Palestine, Transjordan and Iraq. The Arabs were not consulted. When Emir Faisal (the brother of Abdallah) set up a Syrian kingdom in Damascus, he was brutally thrown out by the French. A later national Arab revolt against the French, led curiously enough by the Druze, was put down with great cruelty.

The Muslims, who constituted the overwhelming majority in united Syria, hated the French conquerors and continued to hate them until the last day of their rule in Syria, when the British evicted them in the course of World War II (with the help of the “illegal” Jewish forces in Palestine. It was in this campaign that Moshe Dayan lost his eye and gained his trademark eye patch.)

THE MAIN aim of French rule from its first day was to turn the Lebanon mountains into a solid French dominion, based on the Christian population. They decided to cut Lebanon off from Syria and turn it into a separate state. This separation aroused a huge storm among the Muslims, but without effect.

Then there arose the crucial question that casts its shadow over Lebanon to this very day: should the Christians be satisfied with a small state, in which they would constitute a decisive majority, or should they prefer a large state and annex extensive Muslim territories. This was called in French “le Grand Liban” – Greater Lebanon.

Every Israeli can easily recognize this dilemma.

There is a Jewish legend in which Pharaoh was told that a newborn baby called Moses was destined to become a king. In order to test him, Pharaoh offered the baby, side by side, a

golden crown and a heap of burning coals. The baby extended its hand towards the crown, but God sent an angel who pushed the hand towards the coals. Pharaoh was satisfied and Moses was saved.

When the Christians in Lebanon were offered this choice, they chose the crown.

Acceding to their demands, the French included in Lebanon the Muslim towns of Tripoli, Beirut, Sidon and Tyre, the Bekaa valley and the entire Shiite South. All the inhabitants of these “disputed territories”, as they were to be called, including the Shiites, opposed this violently, but to no avail. All opposition was brutally crushed by the French.

EVEN AT the founding of Greater Lebanon, the Maronites constituted a minority of the population. All the Christians together, including all the various communities, made up a bare majority. It was clear that the Muslims, with their higher birthrate, would become the majority in the Christian state before too long.

This, of course, happened soon enough. The Muslims did give up their dream of turning the wheel back and returning the “disputed territories” to their Syrian homeland, but they started to struggle against the total domination of Lebanon by the Christians. In the course of time, the Christians were forced to surrender some of their privileges to the other communities. An iron-clad communal division was put in place: the president (with extensive executive powers) was always a Christian, the Prime Minister a Sunni Muslim, and so forth, down the line. But within a short time, this division ceased to reflect the demographic realities.

To use Israeli terms: Lebanon claimed to be a “Christian and democratic state”. But as a matter of fact, it never was a democratic state, and gradually it ceased to be a Christian state as well.

The short history of Lebanon consists entirely of a struggle between the communities which were joined together against their will, like cats in a sack. One can learn a lot about this from the excellent book recently released by Patrick Seale, “The Struggle for Arab Independence”.

The struggle reached one of its peaks in the great civil war that started in 1975. The Syrians invaded the country in order to defend (how ironic!) the Christians against the Muslims, who were reinforced by the PLO which had established a kind of mini-state in the south, after being expelled from Jordan.

Into this mess blundered the leaders of Israel, without having the slightest idea about the complexities of the situation. Sharon invaded Lebanon in 1982 in order to annihilate the PLO and drive the Syrians – their enemies – out. The IDF struck a deal

with the Maronites without realizing that they were much better at committing indiscriminate massacres (Sabra and Shatila) than real fighting. 18 years and hundreds of dead soldiers were needed to extricate the Israeli army from this trap.

The Israeli intervention had only one lasting effect, and a totally unexpected one. The Shiites in the South of Lebanon, the most downtrodden community in the country, held in utter contempt by both the Christians and the Sunnis, suddenly woke up. In their prolonged guerrilla war against the Israeli army, they became an important political and military, and finally a decisive national force in Lebanon. If Hezbollah indeed takes over the whole country, it would owe Ariel Sharon a statue in the central square of Beirut.

THE PRESENT crisis is a continuation of all the former crises. But during the 90 years of Lebanon’s existence as a state, profound changes have taken place. The Christians are now a secondary force, the Sunni Muslims have also seen their political importance diminished. Only the Shiites have gained ground.

The present crisis started with the assassination of Rafiq al-Hariri, the Sunni Prime Minister, whose place was filled by his son, Saad al-Din Rafiq al-Hariri. (The word assassination, by the way, is derived from the medieval Shiite sect of Hashishi’in.) An international investigation was set in motion, mainly in order to damage Syria, the enemy of the US, but the traces led in the direction of Hezbollah. To forestall the report, Hezbollah and its allies (including an important Christian general) this week brought down the coalition government, of which they were a part. Saudi Arabia and Syria, recently mortal enemies, joined forces in an effort to avert a catastrophe that could easily spread throughout the region. They offered a compromise – but the US instructed its client, Hariri, to reject it.

The Americans resemble – and even upstage – the Israelis in their arrogance and ignorance, which border on fatal irresponsibility. Their intervention this week, emanating from a frivolous contempt for the incredible complexity that is called Lebanon, may bring about a civil war and/or a conflagration that may involve Israel.

All this would have been prevented, and 90 years of suffering might have been avoided, if the Christians had been satisfied with their part of the country. When they chose the option of “Greater Lebanon” – a clear parallel to “Greater Israel” – they condemned themselves and their country to 90 years of struggle and pain, without an end in sight.

At the decisive moment, no angel diverted their hand from the golden crown to the burning coals. Now we Israelis face a very similar choice.