

Making room for realism and ambition

by Chibli Mallat

Looking to the medium-term role of Lebanon in the more mundane Middle East scene of politics and international relations, the margin for manoeuvre is much more limited than from any cultural perspective. The reflection here should depart from an approach to the field which is both pro-active and humble.

It must be humble because Lebanon is not a key player regionally and should accept its secondary role in the century-old geopolitical tragedy which colonialism left to the region in the shape of Zionist settlements and expansionism.

This not to say that we have not suffered like others from the conflict, and the gaping wound in the south is now 20 years old. But even the occupation cannot be perceived as a simply bilateral function of a problem between the Israelis and us.

It is part of the larger conundrum, which the international process started in Madrid has tried to address on the basis of Resolution 242 “withdrawal and peace” on all fronts.

Such a comprehensive approach has been brought to a grinding halt, in large part because of the ascent of Netanyahu to power in May 1996.

Two years ago, I added a book to the dozens of contributions in the large library about the Middle East. A book-length study would indeed be the minimal analysis needed to start taking stock of regional problems with their unusual share of complexity.

In the context of a condensed agenda for a new Lebanese president, however, it may be useful to draw on two conclusions reached in that book.

The first is that the various sub-chapters of the Arab-Israeli conflict and indeed of the various crises in the Gulf are closely inter-related, and any approach which does not factor in that complexity will not be successful. That was already the gist of a position paper produced at the University of London in the spring of 1987 which strongly advocated the concept of an international conference as the necessary starting point to give “the complicated Orient”, in de Gaulle’s phrase, its due.

The temporary halt to the Madrid conference should not divert us from the need to pursue relentlessly a comprehensive approach as the only way out of the conflict. The second point is one which has been summarised in the most recent book by Maxime Rodinson (*Entre Islam et Occident*, Paris, 1998), who relates an argument he had with Sartre and other French intellectuals in 1967.

Those intellectuals were simply “incapable of understanding as simple a problem as the Arab-Israeli issue. For me [Rodinson], the matter was, in effect, simple: Israel is a people who take the place of another people, and [Sartre and] the others do not like that, of course”.

Beyond the increased complexity which, over the 50 years of the conflict, has obtained from Israel’s expanding into Lebanese, Syrian, Jordanian and Egyptian

territory, there is this sad but simple truth of a people displaced by another. Whether this was done for messianic, national or historical reasons, the lack of a causal relationship between any of these reasons and the Palestinian victims of Zionism should not matter, even if some of these reasons, like the Holocaust, are tragic. In Edward Said's words, stop "blaming the victims" for historic wrongs in which they played no part.

On the one hand, therefore, is the complicated Orient. It is because the various facets are closely intertwined that we should pursue the concept of an international conference. Only through the comprehensive model which this conference established can all the problems facing the front-line states, including Syria and Lebanon, start being resolved.

At the same time, the approach to the conflict is premised on recognising that simple equation of one people displacing another. Several more generations will have to come to terms with that trite and cruel fact, and it would not be proper for us to hijack the solution in one fell swoop, and prevent our children and grandchildren from devising a more civilised solution than the international conference, and our own limited imagination and many mistakes, may result in.

As a consequence, then, the treaties signed between the PLO, Jordan and Israel are only the first such documents to redress the historic wrong.

Many more will have to follow before the Rodinson equation is fully addressed, and the increasing divide inside Israel, as it is now inside Palestine, will result from a different agenda both for Israel and for Palestine, or better even, for an integrated Israel-Palestine.

So where does this leave the regional agenda of the Lebanese president? If the above analysis is correct, two basic consequences may follow.

First, we must re-activate, once again, the international conference philosophy where it was stopped by the current Israeli government for Syria and Lebanon, at the Wye Plantation preliminary agreements of early 1996 between the Rabin-Peres government and the Syrian ambassador to Washington representing his country; and secondly, for Jordan and Palestine (and even Egypt), we must reactivate the lapsed treaties with a view to fulfilling the entire agenda of withdrawals, rights of people and goods to move across borders with least impediment; mutual disarmament with the view to the creation of a Middle East zone which is free of weapons of mass destruction, including the nuclear, biological and chemical varieties held in Arab, Israeli and Iranian arsenals. South America has succeeded in a similar effort.

Within that comprehensive perspective, the Lebanese-Israeli file of contention must be perceived, and addressed, regionally. This means the continuation of mutual Syrian-Lebanese sacrifices so that the northern front is addressed as one unit, and the enhancement of a common Arab approach within a revived unified Arab front-line or, put in less bellicose terms, "immediate neighbours" delegation.

Even in case of unilateral Israeli withdrawal from the south, and irrespective of Syrian

influence in Lebanon, the Lebanese government must act with a view to the crisis as a whole, and not be gazing at the navel of its borders.

As a corollary to this “international conference” perspective, the new Lebanese president should help regulate the philosophy of front-line Arab states both morally and practically.

Morally, he can do this by pursuing the integrated approach argument, which includes the legitimate need to restart the discussions where they ended.

Practically, and in addition to the issue of occupation and compensation, in one form or the other, for the 20-year flouting of Resolution 425, Lebanon has a significant stake in the ultimate arrangements because of the presence of several hundred thousand stateless Palestinians on its territory.

We should try to act in concert with Arab states in a similar position to give these forgotten people a voice and it might be useful to consider some form of electoral consultation for the Palestinians of the camps in order to bring them back, as a real and self-standing problem and not as an appendix to the PLO-cum-PA to the negotiating table.

This last suggestion for a presidential agenda, which must be coupled with a drive towards a more humane treatment of foreign guests, be they Palestinian, Arab, or South Asian, brings up the strategic message which I think Lebanon is particularly apt to convey that there should be room for everyone in the Middle East, even if there will be no room for everyone’s ambitions.

By bringing up the example of communities and people living together, at peace, in the same land, and by projecting it regionally, Lebanon can pursue again the vision which racist Zionists dread most: a land for all its people Jewish, Christian, Muslims or, equally, Arab and Israeli and which a new humanist Israel might also seek. This is the vision of a non-racial country, where the common political ground is dominantly secular, while much room and appreciation is left for communities be they cultural, national or religious to prosper.

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