

THE SYRIAN OCCUPATION OF LEBANON

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Throughout many centuries of Middle Eastern history, the inclusion of Lebanon within the borders of Syria was standard political discourse and policy. The notions of *bilad ash-Sham*, Greater Syria, and Fertile Crescent unity all expressed, each in its own way, the ambition of Damascus to dominate its geographic surroundings.¹ Beirut served as the port for Damascus, Tripoli lay on the Syrian coast, and the Bekka valley provided a proximate hinterland. A French author recounted the horrible massacre of Christians in Lebanon in 1860 in a work titled **Souvenirs De Syrie**. Writing about the village of Bhamdoun situated on the Beirut-Damascus highway did not dissuade a Lebanese historian in the mid-1990s from identifying its location within what once was “Ottoman Syria”, and placing Mount Lebanon itself within Syria.² Following which, the Syrian political and ideological goal since the mid-1970s, to absorb Lebanon and eliminate any semblance of its separate and autonomous existence, this despite its sovereign independence since the 1920s, evokes a certain historic and geographic resonance.

The contrary and distinctly indigenous notion of a separate Lebanese identity, rooted in particular in the mountain and effusing a Christian mission, rejected the legitimacy and certainly the desirability of a Syrian merger or an Arab affiliation. Resistance to outsiders and the cultivation of a Maronite-dominated Lebanon were hallmarks of the country’s national resilience.³ Therefore, when Syrian forces entered Lebanese territory in 1975 and incrementally spread the net of their military control and political occupation across the country, the idea of a separate and free Lebanon faced a grave challenge. In a famous speech on July 20, 1976, President Hafez al-Assad of Syria conjured up the historical refrain: “Syria and Lebanon were one state and one people...and have shared interests and a common history.” As foreign occupation settled in as a routine reality, the voice of collaboration added its accommodating consent. On the 1999 anniversary of Syria’s October War against Israel in 1973, Lebanese President Emile Lahoud sent greetings to President Assad in which he declared that “the brotherhood and destiny of our countries is the center of our policy.”⁴

Syrian occupation of Lebanon constitutes the natural manifestation of power by the strong against the weak, with outward submission a demonstration of wise prudence or shameless treason. The hard calculus of power may, however, be transformed over time into the dialectic of power whereby oppression catalyzes its demise by a national uprising and revolution. Such a development would undo the mental construct of *Greater Syria* and expose it as an ideological fabrication and historical distortion of the true identity of Lebanon and the Lebanese people. In fact, it is the differentiation that Syrian occupation and power impose on Lebanon – dominating its thought, manipulating its identity, and engineering its politics – that can ultimately lead to the pulverization of the historical paradigm. Central to this liberating process is to unleash the rhetoric of truth, in the spirit of twentieth-century philosophers as different as Leo Strauss and Michel Foucault, in delineating the reality of Syria's occupation of Lebanon.

Modes of Syrian Occupation

1. The Military and Security Domain

The multi-aspect complexity of Lebanese affairs was a historical and political axiom. But it was the eruption of Lebanese-Palestinian warfare in April 1975, against the background of the intense struggle between the Christian Maronite community and the leftist National Movement coalition that provided the context and pretext for sustained Syrian military intervention. Allegedly fearing a Christian-Muslim partition of the country and/or a wholesale PLO takeover, Assad sent Syrian-commanded Palestine Liberation Army battalions, then *Saiqa* "Palestinian" units, into northern Lebanon during the latter part of 1975 and early 1976. On June 1, 1976, 12,000 regular Syrian troops crossed the border; by September the number reached approximately 25,000 men. Their presence in the northern Akkar region, in the eastern Bekka, at Sofar in the central mountain area and near Sidon on the coast, demonstrated that Syrian policing policy was assuming the form of a comprehensive military domination. By November, 6,000 Syrian troops had virtually taken over West Beirut.⁵

Operating however transparently under the name and guise of the Arab Deterrent Force authorized by the Riyadh Summit in October 1976, Syrian troops acted to disarm some Lebanese militias at the same time that the national army of Lebanon disintegrated to the diminutive size of 3,000

troops. By 1977, the number of Syrian troops exceeded 30,000, with over 200 tanks. After fighting the Palestinian and other leftist forces, Druzes and Sunnis in particular, the Syrian army then confronted the Christian Lebanese Forces. Indeed, if Syria was to control and pacify Lebanon, it would of necessity need to reduce the core Christian community that gave Lebanon its special national distinction. For three months, during “the 100 Days War” in mid-1978, Syria bombarded Christian East Beirut, specifically Ashrafiyya, which led to the flight of 300,000 people; at this time Syrian forces were also capturing Batroun and Besharre areas in the heart of the mountain area. A flood of Christian refugees and the execution of many Lebanese civilians were the direct result at this stage of the intensification and extension of Syria’s ruthless conquest of Lebanon.

In the 1980s, Syria further expanded its military control in the areas of Zahle, Aley, Nabatiyeh, and Jezzine, prior to the ultimate military capture of the presidential palace at Ba’abda, southeast of Beirut on October 13, 1990. In that final confrontation Syrian forces defeated Lebanese Army units under the command of General Michel Aoun, who had failed in his self-declared “war of liberation”. Syrian military occupation of Lebanon, therefore, incorporated the entire country with the exception of the southern “security zone” under the control of the Israeli Army (IDF) and its Southern Lebanese Army (SLA) ally. One reliable source suggests that the Syrians were responsible for the deaths of approximately 100,000 Lebanese and the flight of about a half a million people from the country.⁶

Syria stationed its commanding supervision at the Ministry of Defense at Yerze, while organizing its ubiquitous security and intelligence apparatus (*mukhabarat*) under Colonel Ghazi Kana’an who became the personal notorious manifestation of the occupation regime. In short order the Syrians confirmed that, as Hannah Arendt wrote, “terror is the essence of totalitarian domination.”⁷ Political assassination was its most dreadful form attested by the murders of noted **national leaders**, like Kamal Junblatt, the Druze head of the Progressive Socialist Party in 1977, Bashir Gemayel, commander of the Lebanese Forces and president-elect of Lebanon in 1982, and Rene Mo’awed, President of Lebanon in 1989. **Religious dignitaries**, such as Father Philippe Abou-Sleimane in Aley and Sheikh Ahmed Assaf in 1982, and Sheikh Hassan Khaled the Sunni Mufti of Lebanon in 1989, were also disposed of. **Well-known journalists** like Selim Al-Lowzi in 1977 and Riyad Taha, president of the Lebanese Press Association, in 1980 became

victims of the Syrian security hit squads. Certain sources claim that the assassination of Dany Chamoun, son of former Lebanese president Camille Chamoun, in October 1990 was the work of the Syrians with Lebanese collaboration,⁸ while others disagree.⁹ The attempted assassinations of Pierre Gemayel, founder of the Kata'ib (Phalange movement) and father of Bashir and Amin, Raymond Edde the National Bloc leader, Camille Chamoun former president and head of the Liberal Party, and the Greek Catholic patriarch Maximos V. Hakim, should be noted in this context.

The presence of Syrian soldiers and plainclothesmen at Beirut airport and on the road to Baalbek were two visible signs among many that foreign occupation had become the daily reality of Lebanese life.¹⁰ Monitoring telephone conversations of Lebanese citizens and recording visits to Patriarch Nasrallah Sfeir of the Maronite Church in Bkirke are other forms of Syrian "security" measures. While it had been customary within the Lebanese military tradition to send its personnel for officer training to Europe and the United States, it now became mandatory to send them to Syrian military academies. No less ominous in Lebanon's slide toward national oblivion was the choice of Lebanese Army Commander Emile Lahoud as President in 1998, which seemed to signal the transcending Syrian objective to tie the armies of Syria and Lebanon into a joint military force for future warfare, perhaps against Israel to the south. Meanwhile, though a Maronite continued to be the commander of the army, Muslim conscripts constituted about 65 per cent of the total numbers.

Central to the atmosphere of fear that enveloped Lebanon was the practice of kidnapping and arrest of Lebanese citizens, the use of torture against them, and often their virtual disappearance that included, unknown to their families, removal to the Mezza and Palmyra prisons in Syria.¹¹ Within Lebanon itself, Syria operated detention facilities in Tripoli, Beirut, Shtaura in the Bekka and Anjar on the Lebanese-Syrian border. Some individual kidnapping cases included that of Jihad Eid from Haddess, south of Beirut, in 1990; Boutros Khawand, senior Phalange Party official who was lifted from Beirut in 1992, Albert Shidiyak a sympathizer of General Aoun in 1993; Kaytel Hayek a lieutenant-colonel in the Lebanese Army in 1994; and Albert Jaber Atallah Loh from Zalka in East Beirut in 1995.¹² Intense efforts by family members sometimes succeeded in discovering that the detained Lebanese were being held in the Mezza prison in Damascus. Political activities against the Syrian occupation or contacts with "the Zionist enemy"

were the presumed reasons for the arrests, though no public charges were laid and no trials were held. Lebanese President Elias Harawi had estimated that in 1996 some 210 Lebanese were in Syrian custody, many for prolonged periods of secret detention.¹³ In one case that Human Rights Watch reported in November 1999, Syrian authorities in Damascus, offering no explanation whatsoever, returned the dead body of Lebanese citizen Adel Khalaf Ajouri, aged 52, who had “disappeared” in 1990.

The removal, neutralization, and silencing of leading Lebanese political personalities was achieved by various means other than assassination or disappearance. Some were tried and jailed, or first jailed and then tried, as in the case of Samir Geagea accused of the murder of Prime Minister Rashid Karame in 1987 and the 1994 church bombing in Jounieh (which was probably perpetrated by Syrian agents). He was sentenced to death but this was commuted to life imprisonment. Others like Etienne Sakr (Abu Arz), chairman of the Guardians of the Cedars, fled Beirut to Jezzine, under the control of the South Lebanese Army until mid-1999, and then to his native village of Ayn Ebel in southern Lebanon, under the protection of the Israeli Army. Still others went into forced or self-imposed exile abroad, the three most notable cases being former President Amin Gemayel, General (and former Prime Minister) Michel Aoun, and National Bloc leader Raymond Edde, all of whom are living in Paris. Clear and compelling evidence exists that prior to their exile, and perhaps after, Syria had tried to assassinate these three leaders.¹⁴

2. The Political and Judicial Domain

Lebanon had become, as Amin Gemayel stated in 1997, “a Syrian client state”,¹⁵ a virtual satellite or satrap of Damascus subjugated under “Syrian strategic hegemony”.¹⁶ From mediator in the 1975-76 war to political broker of inter-communal conflict, Syria came to dominate the Lebanese political arena and shaped its evolving power arrangements as the reality of occupation took form.

The formal facade and consensual cast to Syrian rule were a series of agreements that began with the “Constitutional Document” of February 1976 that was prepared through the intervention of Syrian Foreign Minister Abdul Halim Khaddam. While identifying Lebanon as an Arab state, this document proposed a 50:50 division of parliamentary representation, thereby

eliminating the traditional Christian advantage over the Muslims. The “Tripartite Agreement” involving Walid Junblatt (Druzes), Nabih Berri (Shiites), and Elie Hobeika (Christians) of December 1985, and again worked out by now Syrian Vice-President Khaddam, was signed in Damascus and signaled the growing formalization of the imminent Syrian Order in Lebanon: defined as an Arab country with a distinctive relationship with Syria. Following the final conquest of Ba’abda and Beirut in 1990, Syria concluded the Brotherhood Treaty for Coordination and Cooperation with Lebanon on May 22, 1991. It was this agreement, with its spin-off of 14 separate ones, which solidified the integration of the two countries in matters of security and intelligence, finance and trade, industry and agriculture, by establishing the mechanism for Syrian diktat under the cover of “joint” decision-making.

Damascus effected the consolidation of its grip over Lebanon by acquiring a regional Arab political stamp. The mini Arab summit at Riyadh followed by the broader Cairo Summit both in October 1976 provided a platform for authorizing Syrian military occupation of Lebanon under the umbrella of the Arab Deterrent Force. Two years later, the Beit a-Din Arab Conference that convened in Mount Lebanon referred explicitly to the country’s Arab identity. In July 1982, in the throes of Israel’s crushing war against the PLO in Lebanon, the Beirut government took a decision not to renew the mandate of the ADF, in order to bring about a complete withdrawal of all non-Lebanese forces – both Syrian and Israeli. But to no avail, as Syria ignored the Lebanese demand for recovering its independence, at the same time ignoring UN Security Resolution 520 from September 17, 1982, that took “note of Lebanon’s determination to ensure the withdrawal of all non-Lebanese forces from Lebanon.” Thereafter, in 1984, Syria succeeded to compel President Amin Gemayel and the parliament to nullify the May 17 Agreement that Lebanon had signed with Israel in 1983, following which, and obedient to Syrian directives, Prime Minister Rashid Karame declared the closing of the Israeli liaison office in Dbayeh.¹⁷

But the penultimate political recognition of Damascus’s domination was the Syrian-Saudi prepared Taif Accord in October 1989. Christian and Muslim Lebanese parliamentarians, like penitent sinners going to Canossa, dutifully attended the conference and approved the final document. Admittedly, the Accord called upon Syria to redeploy its forces within two

years to the Bekka valley in eastern Lebanon, which it did not do; while the final withdrawal from Lebanese territory was to be based on a subsequent agreement between the two countries which was never made. Consistent with earlier reform proposals for the Lebanese political system, the Taif agreement erected a re-designed troika regime headed by the Christian Maronite President with reduced powers, the Sunni Prime Minister with increased powers, and the Shiite Speaker of the National Assembly. References to end confessionalism, doublespeak for eradicating Christian primacy, and to confirm the country's Arab identity serving as a euphemism for denying Lebanese particularity, were additional components of the Taif formula that Syria imposed on its fatigued and factionalized tiny neighbor to the west.

Lebanese national political institutions and political figures fell under the tight control of Syria concomitant with its military intervention in the mid-1970s. The political pilgrimages to Damascus of Maronite leaders Pierre Gemayel in December 1975 and Camille Chamoun in early 1976, the latter having not visited the Syrian capital for two decades, illustrated that Lebanon's fate was passing into the hands of Hafez al-Assad. Lebanese President Suleiman Franjieh (1970-76) had been known to be on close terms with the Syrian president, while Syria's nominee Elias Sarkis as his successor, was "elected" president by the National Assembly in 1976. When Sarkis wanted to include the Druze *za'im* Kamal Junblatt in his cabinet in November, Assad blocked the move due to Junblatt's opposition to the growing role of Syria in Lebanon. A year later Junblatt's continued opposition to Syria cost him his life.

President-elect Bashir Gemayel, destined to succeed Sarkis, was assassinated on September 14, 1982 by a member of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP) in collusion with the Syrian intelligence services in Beirut.¹⁸ His brother Amin, who became the next Lebanese president, collapsed under direct Syrian political pressure, as already noted, by not adding his signature to the May 17 Agreement with Israel, and appointed under duress the pro-Syrian Rashid Karame as Prime Minister. Meanwhile Amin's government withered in the face of Syrian-supported Druze and Shiite warfare against the National Army in the mid-1980s. At the end of his term in 1988, Amin Gemayel had lost his presidential authority and was forced into exile in France. His successor Rene Mo'awad from Zgharta, stubborn in the face of Syrian directives, was murdered in a road-side

bombing attack against his vehicle on November 22, 1989, after serving just eighteen days in office. Elias Hrawi from Zahle came next, pliant and weak as one might expect thereafter. Syrian concern for Lebanese continuity led to his hasty election that was organized by Col. Ghazi Kana'an at the Park Hotel in the mountain town of Shtaura. Assad later arranged for the extension of his presidential term, scheduled to end in 1995, for another three years. Later, on October 5, 1998 according to **The Lebanon Report**, "Mr. Assad informed him [Elias Hrawi] that his time was up and that Syria supported the candidacy of the army commander, Emile Lahoud."¹⁹ After Lahoud's candidature had "been endorsed by Syrian President Hafez al-Assad",²⁰ the Lebanese National Assembly slavishly approved the choice on October 15 with a staged vote of 118 in favor and 10 abstentions. No Lebanese deputy dared openly oppose Assad's presidential appointment in Beirut. Thirteen days after the vote, Beshar Assad, son of the Syrian president, and Ghazi Kana'an, Syria's strongman in Lebanon, held a meeting with the new president of Lebanon. For the first time a Sunni officer was appointed to head the presidential guard.

The other two so-called "presidential" offices were subject to the same pattern of Syrian domination. When Assad became disaffected with Sunni Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri and the stench of corruption surrounding him in 1998, he replaced him with the more docile Selim al-Hoss. Likewise, in 1984, Syria had Kamal al-Assad the Shiite Speaker of the Chamber of Deputies removed because he had supported the May 17 Agreement between Lebanon and Israel. In his place Hussein Hussein, a pro-Syrian supporter, was appointed.

Lebanese politicians who actively accommodated the Syrian occupation afforded Damascus a mechanism of "indirect rule" through local personages, thereby providing vivid proof of the normative character of Lebanon's quiet dissolution as an independent political entity. Beyond those already mentioned were Michel Murr, a Greek Orthodox from the Metn, who while strong and despised in Lebanon, headed a number of senior ministries, including Interior and Defense, over the years. In his official capacity he had a hand in the repression of popular protest against the Syrian occupation. Another even more notorious collaborator was Elie Hobeika, a Maronite who had fought Samir Geagea for the command of the Lebanese Forces, but then became a turncoat – against Israel his ally and the Christian resistance he had fought for – and joined with the Syrians. This offered him

opportunities for money and power. Close to Rifaat Assad and a central actor in the apparent Syrian-orchestrated massacre at Sabra and Shatilla in September, 1982, Hobeika worked closely with Col. Ghazi Kana'an and went on to become the Minister for Energy and Infrastructure in the 1990s.²¹ For the moment, collaboration offered tempting rewards.

The holding of parliamentary elections, as presidential elections, in a political environment of domination and trepidation could not at all provide a gauge of true Lebanese views. Parties had been banned and organized opinion smothered. It was only in 1992 that the last-elected 1972 chamber was finally replaced, but even then, the presence of Syrian troops in Beirut as a conspicuous sign of foreign occupation led the Christian population in the capital and the mountain area, and the Phalange Party itself, to boycott the elections. Farid el-Khazen explained that multiple Christian grievances, including the question of displaced refugees from the 1983 "mountain war" and selective disarming of militias, contributed to widespread alienation and non-participation in the 1992 elections. In fact, only fifteen per cent of all eligible voters participated in these elections. In short, the democratic facade could not conceal the dictatorial hands of Assad from afar.²² A similar picture of Lebanese politics lacking vigor and authenticity characterized the 1996 parliamentary elections.

It remains to point out that Syria's political machinations of a particularly manipulative kind involved the use of local Lebanese proxies. Assad's tactical goals changed with the circumstances, but focused in fundamental terms on controlling the sectarian conflict, enhancing Syrian domination, and eliminating Israel's role and presence in Lebanon. Thus, he at times used the Christians against the leftist National Movement and the Progressive Socialist Party; then, he changed course and acted in the opposite direction. The Druze and Shiites were employed against the Gemayel government; Hobeika and followers served Syria's interest to exacerbate divisions within the Christian Lebanese Forces; and Amal and Hizbullah were sponsored to fight Israel and the SLA. Syria assigned a central role to the ideologically compatible SNNP as a terrorist and vanguard movement against the Maronite Christian community. Claiming clean hands was another sophisticated ruse of Hafez al-Assad.

Lebanese judicial institutions too have been mobilized to impose Syrian control. Death sentences *in absentia* were routinely issued against patriots and oppositionists, and actual court sentences have been imposed on former

SLA soldiers and civilians associated with Israel in southern Lebanon.²³ The courts have not been a bastion for the protection of human rights nor for their redress when trampled upon. The security forces handily arrested five members of the Lebanese Popular Convention when they merely distributed anti-government leaflets in March 1996. This and more while influential Lebanese politicians and Syrian intelligence officers have intervened to protect their supporters from prosecution. The virtual militarization of the courts led the Chief Judge of the High Constitutional Court, Wajdi Mallat, to resign due to excessive interference by the Syrian-controlled authorities in the execution of his duties.²⁴ At the “Conference on Judges in Lebanon” organized by the Lebanese Center for Policy Studies in July 1999, the distinguished participants from the legal profession dealt *inter alia* with “constraints facing the corps of judges in Lebanon”. This rather mild formulation covered yet a more sinister reality.

The overall methods of Syrian occupation exacted an enormous human price from exiles abroad who could not return home, dispersed around the world among divided families, and internal exiles like those in the south of Lebanon who could not travel freely to Beirut. The police net was spread wide and far, with no sign at all that the scales were altering away from oppression and toward liberty.

3. The Social and Economic Domain

Syrian occupation inaugurated a period of radical changes in the Lebanese social environment. The death of more than 100,000 Lebanese during the war years and the flight abroad of an estimated half million or more citizens struck fatally and especially at the size and cohesion of the Christian elements of the population. But the really insidious developments concerned the influx of large numbers of foreign elements. Tens of thousands of Assad’s Alawite kinsmen entered northern Lebanon into the area of Tripoli, a kind of extension southward of the Lattakia mountain heartland of the Alawites. More ominous in scope and significance was the influx into Lebanon of approximately one million or more Syrian migrant workers as a virtual colonization movement to change the human landscape in a menacing fashion. Back in 1976, Assad had explained the importance of Syrian involvement in Lebanese affairs at a time when half a million Syrians worked in Lebanon. The eruption of war threatened to cause the Syrian

workers to return home and further burden an existing weak Syrian economy. Better they migrate to Lebanon than destabilize Assad's regime in Damascus. Therefore, Syria created a situation whereby over one million Syrians flooded Lebanon in the 1990s, as menial construction workers, taxi-drivers, and street hawkers. A cold and startling calculation will conclude that more Syrians worked in Lebanon than did Lebanese themselves.²⁵

The de-Christianization importance and impact of these developments was further magnified by a 1994 naturalization decree that granted Lebanese citizenship to some 500,000 aliens, mainly Syrians and Palestinians.²⁶ Non-Lebanese would then become a powerful voting bloc in future "democratic" Lebanese elections. It was estimated that the Christian proportion of the entire population had, though over half of the total in the 1930s and thereafter, sunk to between 30-40 per cent in the 1990s. East of Damour and Sidon large tracts of land were being purchased in the name of the Sunni al-Jamaat al-Islamiyya, a threat to the traditional Christian (and Druze) populations there. Lebanon was thereby experiencing the loss of its native national personality parallel to losing the mainsprings of its political independence.

Rampant small crime and regime repression of popular protest further dampened the remaining spirit and confidence of a once free people famous for its *joie de vivre*. The widespread stealing of cars and acts of arson in Christian areas in particular were reported in the late 1990s. In October 1998, the rape of a young girl in the village of Shehim – allegedly by a Syrian migrant – caused large-scale reprisals against Syrian laborers living in the region.²⁷ In a different incident, young Christians in the Kesrouan clashed with members of the SSNP in February 1998. But in another incident involving activist youth in December 1997, Lebanese riot police dispersed about 200 university students who had gathered at the MTV television station in Beirut which the authorities had barred from broadcasting an interview with the exiled Christian leader, Michel Aoun. Several people were injured and 63 were arrested. Protests continued as 1,000 university students held a peaceful demonstration in front of the Chamber of Deputies, chanting anti-Syrian slogans. The Lebanese were no longer masters of their house or at home in their homeland.

The liberal and vibrant Lebanese economy had succumbed to Syrian management in the fashion of the public sector dominating the private sector. With a per capita income about four times that of Syria's, and a gross

national product that exceeded hers,²⁸ Lebanon found herself faltering in the face of massive Syrian intervention. Syria's unemployment problem, being alleviated by a flood of migrant laborers crossing freely into Lebanon, had become Lebanon's reaching to about 30 per cent of the Lebanese workforce. It is estimated that Syrian worker earnings from Lebanon, that returned to Syria to energize its sluggish economy, amounted to \$300 per month.²⁹ Moreover, Syrian companies received government tender projects; Syrian officials grabbed tax revenues for their own purposes, as Syrian officers/agents collected taxes at army check-points and "protection money" as, for example, from the well-known Shekka cement industry south of Tripoli. Government-imposed bans on certain imports and high customs dues on others, along with Syrian smuggled agricultural produce pouring into Lebanon, contributed to benefiting Syria while damaging Lebanon. Further unemployment and rural pauperization were the results;³⁰ this, while cars were smuggled free of taxes from Lebanon into Syria. Notorious to mention was Syrian financial gain from its involvement in the drug processing industry in the Bekka, which perhaps ended in the mid-1990s, perhaps not.

Lebanon's shackled economy contrasted with the impression of major reconstruction projects launched by the Hariri government in Beirut. The Hamra district was bustling again with renovated and new hotels and restaurants. Tourism was on the rise toward the end of the last decade of the century, while Lebanon continued to descend into national oblivion. Syrian occupation had severely jolted Lebanese society and economics from their former course despite some outward appearances to the contrary.

4. The Cultural and Media Domain

Lebanon's historic tradition of political liberty had nurtured an environment for freedom of speech, cultural richness, and media diversity, at the heart of its national experience. Journalism flourished and publishing houses abounded, openness to the world of learning a proud social trademark. Free thinkers and activists would flee the repressive atmosphere of Arab police states and come to produce their works of culture and engage in their passionate ideological struggles in the political refuge of Beirut. Palestinian revolutionaries among them George Habash and Yasir Arafat, and writers like Adonis (Ali Ahmed Said) from Syria and Buland Haidari

from Iraq, benefited from the air of freedom in Lebanon.³¹ But that ended with the Palestinian war against the Lebanese in 1975 and the Syrian occupation of Lebanon that ensued. Syria “the great prison”, in the words of Kamal Junblatt, had fashioned Lebanon into a replica of itself.³² A sad sense of impotence, aspiring for liberty but suffering under tyranny, was the melancholy tone and inward turn in a moving book by Antoun Ghattas Karam.³³

In matters pertaining to religion, the Syrians could be brutal in murdering men of the cloth, both Muslim and Christian, and yet avoided excessive repression in this sacred domain. In particular, they refrained from any confrontation with the Maronite Patriarch Nasrallah Sfeir who, though initially voicing acceptance of the Taif Accord, still represented a symbol of Lebanese Christian autonomy and dignity.³⁴ The Pope’s visit to Beirut in 1997 also served to maintain a semblance of religious co-existence under the Syrian military umbrella.

Nonetheless, the Christians of Lebanon found themselves caught in a persistent siege. Church bombings aroused fear for the future. The introduction of new texts in the school curriculum, that stressed Lebanon’s Arab identity and brotherhood with Syria, yet castigated Israel as its implacable enemy, was central to the cultural assault on the historic code of the Maronites, above all others. Lebanon, with its Arab face, was to go under the knife and undergo the transplant now of an Arab heart.³⁵ Yet there were no obvious major changes in the area of the arts and theatre and, in fact, some theatre companies, like Les Chansoniers and Theatre de 10 Heures, used their art form as a platform to criticize the Syrians, be it indirectly. At the same time, Syria’s cultural grip reached as far as southern Lebanon still under IDF-SLA control, where in August 1998 Beirut authorities prevented the well-known singer Hani El-Oumari from appearing at the Ayn Ebel summer festival.³⁶ The stifling of the spirit, with foreign books and movies banned, remained a Syrian objective within its own terrain of occupation and no less within the Israeli-controlled zone as well.

A major Syrian imperative was to control the news and political commentary emanating from the Lebanese media. In 1977 seven Beirut newspapers were closed down, including the foremost and widely read **Al-Nahar**, as a number of journalists and editors were arrested. At that time it was forbidden for the press to even mention the name of Kamal Junblatt.³⁷ Over the years, newspapers and magazines were intermittently closed while

under the supervision of the Surete Generale, and journalists learned through intimidation to practice “self-censorship”. This became a very effective method to silence opposition and limit any criticism of Syria, while strengthening the Arabist orientation of the press. The experience of Pierre Atallah, a journalist for **Al-Nahar**, is a particular and extensively cited case in point: he was arrested in December 1996, accused among other things of protesting Syrian occupation and “contacting Israeli agents”. He fled to France in 1997 and was later sentenced *in absentia* in June 1998 by the Lebanese military prosecution. Tony Shamiyeh, another Beirut journalist, was sentenced to a year in jail on charges of “collaboration with Israel”.

Broadcasting Law no. 382 of 1994 provided the legislative framework for controlling and restricting Lebanese radio and television. Where there once were 54 television stations, the authorities reduced the number to only four. In 1996, pro-Syrian figures received TV broadcasting licenses: one owned by friends of Rafiq Hariri, one affiliated with Nabih Berri, and one in the hands of Gabriel Murr, brother of Minister of Interior Michel Murr. Licenses for independent-minded Christian outfits, like Tele-Lumiere and the Phalange Voice of Lebanon, were either denied or granted with limitations imposed on the freedom of broadcasting.³⁸ Popular protest against the suppression of freedom of expression, for some and not others, did not alter the situation. A poignant example of information terrorism concerned the Lebanese Broadcasting Company, with the removal of its director Pierre Daher and the hiring of Syrian-appointee Nader Souker, with the inferior job title as “coordinator” and not director of the important LBC.

The muzzle on the free flow of information and opinion in Lebanon is in sharp contrast to the legacy of journalism in that country. Psychological warfare through words and images had to a degree replaced the vitality of the older and impressive tradition. Pro-Syrian/Arabist-oriented and/or auto-censored journalists, like Ghassan Tueni and his son Gebran at **Al-Nahar**, feared to report what happens, and more critical yet, what they really thought. Nothing appeared in the written or electronic media in the spring of 1999, of an incident wherein Syrians had stolen some cars and then, in a clash of some kind with the Lebanese Army, some Syrians were killed. Only in southern Lebanon was this event discussed.³⁹ It is this seeming unsensational news item which might nevertheless conceal something of important significance. The act of repression indicates that that which is repressed can carry great political weight.

Models and Meaning of Syrian Occupation

The Syrian occupation of Lebanon recalls the German Nazi *anschluss* with Austria in 1936 in many striking ways.⁴⁰ There were many Austrians who had always thought of themselves as members of the German nation in the spirit of a Pan-German ideology; so too many Lebanese Sunni Muslims and Orthodox Christians thought of themselves as part of the Syrian people and the Arab nation, more than as Lebanese patriots. With strong native Nazi sentiments and offering no resistance to the entrance of German troops, Austria lost its identity and existence. Lebanon, which did offer resistance to Syrian occupation in the late 1970s and late 1980s in particular, succumbed with many Lebanese choosing capitulation and collaboration. The fall of Vienna and Beirut, centers of commerce and the arts, spelled the collapse of a country. With Austria annexed, Czechoslovakia was circled: with Lebanon conquered, Israel was circled too.

This introduces another historical analogy to consider: German irredentism *vis-à-vis* Czechoslovakia at Munich in 1938 through the claim to the German-inhabited Sudetenland, relates to the thrust of Syrian irredentism according to the doctrine of “Greater Syria” and the SSNP ideology of a common Syrian racial stock that envelops the people of Lebanon. The Orwellian twist would conceive of the Lebanese fulfilling their right to “self-determination” and “liberated” from alien ideologies and forces, but only when Lebanon came under Syrian occupation in 1975.

The history of Vichy France in collaboration with Nazi Germany evokes a resonance regarding “Vichy” Lebanon in collaboration with the Syrian regime of Hafez el-Assad.⁴¹ Exhausted by World War I, France collapsed as the Germans walked into Paris in 1940; so too Lebanon, exhausted from warfare with the Palestinians, accommodated the Syrian entry of 1975-76. Nazi Germany brought order and discipline to French politics and society, while Syria brought its brand of “law and order” to the streets of Beirut and beyond. The Nazis and their French partners altered the institutions and values of France: so too Syria in Lebanon. French generals collaborated with Hitler as Lebanese generals collaborated with Assad. But De Gaulle, representing *la résistance* and the Free French, challenged the authority of Petain and Laval to speak and act in the name of France: Major Sa’ad Haddad and General Antoine Lahad in southern Lebanon, and Amin Gemayel, General Michel Aoun, and Raymond Edde exiled in France, symbolized the Lebanese resistance, though weak it seemed. As Germany

exploited France for its human and material resources, so Syria does to Lebanon. De Gaulle wanted guns from the United States in order to fight to free France, as Camille Chamoun and Bashir Gemayel wanted guns from Israel to fight for a free Lebanon. Vichy sentenced De Gaulle to death, but he not only survived but later became the president of the French Republic. Petain, however, later died in a French prison.⁴² A Lebanese court sentenced Abu Arz to death: perhaps he too will one day become the president of the Lebanese Republic, while Lahoud will languish in a Lebanese prison.

Stalinism in Eastern Europe and Syrianism in Lebanon offer certain parallels for consideration. Military invasion, political manipulation, and ideological co-optation supplied the means for the Soviet Union to penetrate and dominate Eastern Europe; these were the methods employed by Syria against Lebanon. The common goal was the homogenization of thought and culture under centralized rule.⁴³ A facade of brotherhood, communist in the Soviet case, was riveted to the political concentration on the Stalinist personality cult, along with a persistent cultivation of the theme that a common enemy must be thwarted and liquidated. In the Syrian case, as Assad's picture stares at the resident and visitor of Beirut and Khalde, the Lebanese are being indoctrinated to see Israel as the enemy and Syria as their savior. As the Warsaw Pact exposed Hungary and Czechoslovakia to Russian military intervention, so the Defence Agreement between Syria and Lebanon that arose from the comprehensive treaty between the countries in 1991 opened up the "land of the cedars" for Syrian military domination at any time.

Anschluss, Munich, Vichy, and Stalinism constitute four models of foreign domination suggestively comparable to the Syrian mode of control and discourse regarding the occupation of Lebanon.

Lebanon ceased to exist much like Austria ceased to exist under the *Anschluss*.⁴⁴ In fact, Syria never recognized Lebanon's existence from the moment of her independence in 1946, refusing to establish diplomatic relations with Lebanon and having foreign embassies in Damascus be accredited to Beirut as well. A form of proximate "imperialism" functioned in both cases under the guise of a shared nationalism.

The Munich Agreement was an act of political homicide that won the approval of the "enlightened" European community. Syria, for her part, strangled any remaining breath of Lebanon's independent existence in

October 1990 with the tacit approval of the United States and Europe. While violating United Nations Resolution 520 from 1982 and even the Taif Accord from 1989, Syria has earned international acceptability and respectability. Meanwhile, like a lone voice of conscience, the U.S. Congress considered the “Lebanon Independence Restoration Act of 1999” as a way of identifying and condemning Syrian occupation as a denial of freedom, that should cost Syria any aid or legitimacy that it desires from Washington.⁴⁵ But Churchillian courage and realism did not appear in any international quarter to expose the political naïveté and danger of the “Munich” at Beirut.

The name Vichy has become synonymous with “collaboration”. As a Quisling became generic for betraying one’s homeland, Lebanon provided untold numbers of pro-Syrian accomplices, many of whom were officially and publicly manning the Syrian occupation regime. Others proposed one form or another of accommodation with the reality of affairs while habitually referring to “Israeli occupation” of southern Lebanon, but deliberately refraining from uttering any accusation against “Syrian occupation of Lebanon”.⁴⁶ Yet others reprimanded the Maronite Christians for stubbornly refusing to accept their reduced status within Lebanon.⁴⁷ The inversion of the linguistic discourse and the sapping of Lebanon’s national vigor were intertwined phenomena, just as Syria’s success in sucking the blood of Lebanon while Damascus was drinking the waters of Mount Lebanon formed both the symbolism and the reality of Syrian occupation. Like Vichy France, Lebanon too was becoming a living corpse.

Stalinism, based on dictatorship and engineered social planning, is a central paradigm with which to diagnose Syrian rule in Lebanon. Syrian police methods recall the practices of the Bolshevik regime in Russia. Perhaps Solzhenitsyn’s description of “the history of our sewage disposal system” goes somewhat beyond the functioning of the Syrian system in Lebanon, yet Assad has in principle adopted the basic repressive methods. There is more than a reminiscent similarity in Stalin’s campaign against “counter-revolutionaries” and “capitalists” with Assad’s campaign against Maronite “separatists” and “Israeli agents”.

Lebanon, lying naked and raped, is in the hands of Syrian rulers. Stripped of its independence and disfigured by an erosion of its identity and spirit, the Lebanese body politic is in a state of severe decline. Such is the condition too of a once vibrant national and cultural ethos, as a less developed society – that of Syria – has plundered and manhandled a more advanced one. This

case study is not an instance of a civilizing imperialist mission in a backward country because Syria conquered the “Switzerland of the Middle East”. Syria’s conquest of Lebanon in the late twentieth-century, we may suggest, is of a piece with the Arab conquest of the sophisticated Hellenic Byzantine Orient in the seventh-century. The lust for acquisition, power, and domination tempted the Syrians to exploit the rich and varied resources of, in this case, a weak neighboring country. When Syrian Foreign Minister Farouk al-Shara’a required an urgent heart operation in October 1999, he was brought from Damascus to the American University Hospital in Beirut. The classic British and French imperialists were not accustomed to seek medical treatment in Sudanese Juba or Setif in Algeria, but rather London and Paris. Damascus gains direct benefits from its “colonial” possession in progressive Beirut. Syrian rule had not brought light to Lebanon but, rather, filled the hearts of the Lebanese with darkness.

No less significant is to recognize the Syrian occupation as an instrument to rend asunder an old Christian land and impose *dhimmitude* on a proud and free Christian people.⁴⁸ The events in Lebanon carry broad historical ramifications for the Christians in the Middle East as a whole inasmuch as Lebanon as a Christian homeland was, until now, the major triumph of Christianity in the Muslim-dominated region. For Israel, the end of a free and especially Christian Lebanon leaves her uncomfortably alone as the last remaining pariah *dhimmi* state in the Arab Muslim heartland.

In conclusion, Syrian occupation of Lebanon imposed no risk or cost, incurred no danger and aroused very little active opposition. Quite the opposite; it brought great strategic and economic gains. There was therefore no reason for Syria to voluntarily withdraw. Yet the situation changed markedly in the year 2000 in three major respects:

1. The Israeli army withdrew from southern Lebanon and likewise forced the collapse of its SLA ally there;
2. President Assad of Syria died and was succeeded by his son Beshar; and
3. Voices rose within Lebanon calling for Syria’s withdrawal by the Maronite Patriarch Nasrallah Sfeir, Walid Junblat the Druze leader, and a variety of political personalities both Christian and Muslim.

Thousands of protesters demonstrated in the streets of Beirut and in various places in Mount Lebanon. Thus, the possibility of Lebanon being liberated from Syria cannot be dismissed.⁴⁹ Inherent within the dialectic of domination is the catalyst for a repressed people to rise up and demand its freedom. The Syrian excuse for staying in Lebanon, because Israel is present there, has now been denied. Judgment must be reserved concerning the capability of Beshar Assad to dominate his own political hothouse of Syria, and then that of Lebanon. All this while the Lebanese, disgusted with Syria's extended abusive interference in their lives, seem to have thrown off the cloak of fear in unmasking the foreign occupation for what it is.

Much of Lebanon's long history is a record of alternating scenarios, from military victory to massacre; from independence to foreign conquest. The last chapter in this long history is not yet written.

THE SYRIAN OCCUPATION OF LEBANON

- ¹ Daniel Pipes, **Greater Syria: The History of an Ambition**, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990.
- ² Kamal Salibi, **Bhamdoun: Historical Portrait of a Lebanese Mountain Village**, Center For Lebanese Studies, Papers on Lebanon no. 15, October 1997, Oxford, pp. 4 and 10.
- ³ Walid Phares, **Lebanese Christian Nationalism: The Rise and Fall of an Ethnic Resistance**, Boulder and London: Lynne Reiner Pub., 1995.
- ⁴ *Al-Hayat* (London), October 6, 1999.
- ⁵ Some basic sources that detail the process of Syria's military build-up in Lebanon include: Naomi Joy Weinberger, **Syrian Intervention in Lebanon: The 1975-76 Civil War**, New York: Oxford University Press, 1986; Walid Khalidi, **Conflict and Violence in Lebanon: Confrontation in the Middle East**, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984; and Reuven Avi-Ran, **The Syrian Involvement in Lebanon Since 1975**, Boulder: Westview Press, 1991.
- ⁶ Based on a four-page Arabic report on Syrian occupation of Lebanon sent to the author by Etienne Sakr (Abu-Arz), Chairman of the Guardians of the Cedars Party, dated Oct. 7, 1999.
- ⁷ Hannah Arendt, **The Origins of Totalitarianism**, New York: The World Pub. Co., 1966, p. 464.
- ⁸ Robert M. Hatem, **From Israel to Damascus**, USA: Pride Int'l Pub., 1999, pp. 161-162.
- ⁹ Amnesty International (editions francophone), **Liban: La Situation des droits de l'homme**, Paris, November 1997, p. 35, mentions that Samir Geagea, leader of the Lebanese Forces, was responsible for the murder of Dany Chamoun.
- ¹⁰ From **The New York Times Index 1997** for May 8th.
- ¹¹ Based on the Amnesty International and Etienne Sakr reports already cited.
- ¹² Information in SOLID (Support of Lebanese in Detention), **Semaine D'Action Et De Soutien Des Libanais Detenus Dans Les Prisons Syriennes**, 26 janvier-1er fevrier 1998, Paris, Le 20 Fevrier 1998.

- ¹³ From the U.S. Department of State, **Lebanon Country Report on Human Rights for 1998**, Feb. 26, 1999, printed on <<http://www.aflnet.com/hrreports>>, p. 4 [“AFL” stands for Americans for a Free Lebanon].
- ¹⁴ Information on the attempts against Aoun from interview with him in **Al-Sharq Al-Awsat** (London), October 23, 1997; against Gemayel and Edde, see Reuven Avi-Ran, ch. 10.
- ¹⁵ Statement of Amin Gemayel, former President of Lebanon, before the United States House Committee on International Relations, **US Policy Toward Lebanon**, June 25, 1997, Washington, DC, p. 45.
- ¹⁶ William W. Harris, **The Christian Camp on the Eve of the 1988 Lebanese Presidential Elections**, Occasional Papers 104, Tel-Aviv University, The Shiloah Institute, November 1988, p. 11.
- ¹⁷ **Letter From Lebanon**, no. 3, August 1, 1984, Jerusalem.
- ¹⁸ On the SSNP, see Labib Zuwiyya Yamak, **The Syrian Social Nationalist Party: An Ideological Analysis**, Harvard Middle Eastern Monographs, XIV, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1966, and extensive discussion in Pipes, **Greater Syria**, op. cit.
- ¹⁹ **The Lebanon Report**, no. 4, Winter 1998, Beirut, p. 3.
- ²⁰ **Keesing’s Record of World Events 1998**, vol. 44, no. 10, p. 42584; and **The Reporter** (Arabic), no. 1, October 1998, London, which referred to “the election” of Emile Lahoud.
- ²¹ Revelations on Hobeika’s role in the Sabra and Shatilla events are found in Hatem, **From Israel to Damascus**, op. cit.
- ²² Farid el Khazen, **Lebanon’s First Postwar Parliamentary Election, 1992: An Imposed Choice**, Center for Lebanese Studies, Oxford, February 1998.
- ²³ **Lebanon Bulletin**, July 28, 1999, Beirut/Jezzine.
- ²⁴ **United States Policy Toward Lebanon**, op. cit., p. 33.
- ²⁵ Information from Col. Sharbel Barakat in South Lebanon to the author, November 1999.
- ²⁶ **Le Livre Noir De La Syrie Au Liban**, published by the Comite Pour Le Liban Libre, Juillet 1998, Paris; and from the **Testimony of Amine Gemayel**, Address at the Library of Congress, Washington, DC, June 11, 1999, printed on <<http://www.free.lebanon.org>>.
- ²⁷ From **Lebanon Country Report on Human Rights Practices for 1998**, op. cit., p. 8 of internet print-out.
- ²⁸ Data from the **London Economist World in 1999** and **London Economist Intelligence Unit**, 4, 1998.

- ²⁹ Statement by Daniel Nassif, Washington representative of the Council of Lebanese-American Organizations, in **US Policy Toward Lebanon**, op. cit., pp. 32-33.
- ³⁰ **Financial Times**, London, June 17, 1997.
- ³¹ Fouad Ajami, **The Dream Palace of the Arabs**, New York: Pantheon, 1999, chs. 1-3.
- ³² Kamal Jumblatt, **I Speak for Lebanon**, London: Zed, 1982, p. 88.
- ³³ Antoun Ghattas Karam, **Le Livre De Abdullah**, Paris: Arcantere Editions/UNESCO, 1993.
- ³⁴ An article by Fu'ad Hubayqah, "Al-Hariri: 'Godfather' of the Damascus-Bkirke Dialogue", **Al-Watan Al-'Arabi**, Paris, June 6, 1997, dealt with the attitude of Damascus toward the Patriarch.
- ³⁵ It had been customary, since its adhesion as a founding member of the League of Arab States in 1945, to describe Lebanon as having an Arab face but a Lebanese heart.
- ³⁶ Mordechai Nisan, "Christian Decline and Models of Lebanon", Policy Paper no. 83, Ariel Center for Policy Research, Shaarei Tikva (Israel), May 1999, p. 17.
- ³⁷ Tabitha Petran, **The Struggle Over Lebanon**, New York: Monthly Review Press, 1987, pp. 220-221.
- ³⁸ **Human Rights Watch/ME**, 9, April 1, 1997, pp. 2-20.
- ³⁹ Conversation with Salam 'Eid of METV in Marja'youn, South Lebanon, October 1999.
- ⁴⁰ Radomir Luza, **Austro-German Relations in the Anschluss Era**, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975.
- ⁴¹ See Robert O. Paxton, **La France De Vichy 1940-1944**, Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1997.
- ⁴² Jean-Raymond Tournoux, **Sons of France: Petain and De Gaulle**, New York: The Viking Press, 1966.
- ⁴³ George Schopflin, "The Stalinist Experience in Eastern Europe", **Survey: A Journal of East and West Studies**, 30, October 3, 1988, pp. 124-147.
- ⁴⁴ See Habib C. Malik, "Is There Still a Lebanon?", **Middle East Quarterly**, IV, December 4, 1997, pp. 17-23.
- ⁴⁵ The "Lebanon Independence Restoration Act of 1999" was introduced by Representative Michael Forbes in the 1st Session of the 106th Congress, H.R. 2056, June 8, 1999.
- ⁴⁶ For example, Raymond Edde in **Al-Hayat** (London), November 6, 1999.

- ⁴⁷ Article by Emile Khoury in **Al-Nahar**, Beirut, May 10, 1993, p. 2. Another typical reference to *l'occupation israelienne* appears in the "Message Final De L'Assemblee Synodale Pour Le Liban", **Les Cahiers De L'Orient**, Quatrieme trimestre, no. 48, 1997, p. 154.
- ⁴⁸ The term *dhimmitude* implies the Islamic imposition of servitude and humiliation on the inferior non-Muslims. Bashir Gemayel introduced the term in a public address on the very day of his assassination on September 14, 1982 (after Israel had liberated the Christian population in particular from the terror of the Palestinians and the oppression of the Syrians). See Selim Abou, **Bechir Gemayel ou L'Esprit D'Un Peuple**, Paris: Editions anthropos, 1984, pp. 407-415.
- ⁴⁹ See Walid Phares, "Liberating Lebanon", **Middle East Quarterly**, III, December 4, 1996, pp. 21-30.