

Lebanon No Model for Iraq

By Ronald Bruce St John | September 15, 2004

Increasingly desperate to find a winning formula in Iraq, Vice President Dick Cheney and other Bush administration officials are promoting Lebanon as a political model for Iraq. Agreed, the situation in Iraq is looking more and more like Lebanon—but not the “Lebanese model” Cheney talks about. The vice president appears to have in mind a pre-1967 Lebanon in which an elite of notables presided over a pluralistic republic, open to foreign capital, and free enterprise. Beirut in those days was known as the Paris of the Orient.

The Lebanon I have in mind is the one I worked in for several years in the late 1970s and early 1980s after the collapse of the Lebanese political system in the 1975-76 civil war. Torn by ethnic strife and bloody struggles for power, communally based militias presided over sectarian murder and other acts of terror. Foreign powers intervened to turn the conflict to their own strategic advantage as all sides abducted outsiders as bargaining chips.

National Pact

Like Iraq, Lebanon was a Great Power creation following the implosion of the Ottoman Empire during World War I. Lebanon was ruled after the war by France under a League of Nations mandate, finally achieving independence in 1943. Composed of widely different secular and religious groups, the Lebanese elites negotiated among themselves an unwritten National Pact in 1943, which proved far more significant than the written laws of the country. It provided for a sectarian political system designed to minimize conflict among religious confessions or communities.

The National Pact was based on a census conducted in 1932 that established the numerical superiority of Christians over Muslims in Lebanon. Consequently, the Maronite Christians of Lebanon, the single-largest confessional group, were guaranteed the presidency of the republic. Sunni Muslims, the second-largest group, were given the office of prime minister. In turn, the speaker of the unicameral house of parliament was a Shia Muslim, his deputy a Greek Orthodox, the defense minister a Druze, and the commander of the armed forces a Maronite Christian.

The president of Lebanon occupied the single most powerful political position under the National Pact because he was both chief executive and the head of the largest single faction of a highly pluralistic society. Both the chief executive and the legislature were empowered to propose legislation; but in the absence of parliamentary approval, the president could declare emergency legislation. He was also responsible for naming a prime minister from the Sunni

community following consultation with its traditional leaders. The president could dismiss the prime minister and other ministers; however, this option in practice proved complex and difficult to exercise given the plural nature of the Lebanese political system.

Shortcomings of Lebanese Model

If the Lebanese model were applied to Iraq, a Shiite would presumably be guaranteed the presidency since the Shia community constitutes approximately 60% of the population. Representatives of the Sunni and Kurdish minorities would occupy the much less powerful positions of prime minister and speaker of the national assembly. Whether a Sunni or a Kurd was guaranteed the prime ministry would depend on the outcome of a national census since both communities constitute roughly 20% of the population. Lesser components of Iraq's religious and ethnic patchwork would be guaranteed even less powerful positions in the political system. Regardless of how power was distributed, the Iraqis would soon face many of the same problems that eventually throttled the sectarian system adopted by Lebanon.

First of all, the Lebanese political system proved inflexible. Based on a census completed in 1932, it froze political power in a highly dynamic society at a specific point in history. Over time, Shia Muslims came to outnumber the Maronite Christians; however, there was no process in the National Pact to accommodate and adjust to shifting power balances. With the Kurdish and Sunni communities in Iraq enjoying roughly equal numbers, at least until an authoritative census is completed, a similar situation would likely develop in Iraq. The population problem in Lebanon was compounded in 1948-49 by the emigration of some 140,000 Palestinians refugees, most of whom were Muslim. A growing Palestinian military and political presence in southern Lebanon threatened by the 1970s to result in a state within a state. Kurdish demands for autonomy in Iraq, coupled with large Kurdish populations in neighboring Turkey and Iran, could eventually produce a related situation in northern Iraq.



More to the point, the National Pact was based on a political consensus negotiated by competing parties in 1943. No such consensus exists in Iraq today. The Kurds remain concerned that local autonomy provisions in the transitional constitution would soon be eroded if majority Shia rule took effect. Shiites oppose a provision that gives the 20% Kurdish minority an effective veto. In central Iraq, the insurgency is driven in part by the desire of the long dominant Sunni minority to retain some vestige of power. It is also fuelled by crosscurrents of Arab pride, Iraqi nationalism, Islamic fundamentalism, and the tribal loyalties long cultivated by Saddam Hussein. The tendency of U.S. occupation forces to cut separate deals with Kurds, Shiites, and Sunnis in a fruitless effort to keep the peace and project an image of consensus where none exists has only exacerbated the problem.

In Lebanon, post-independence prosperity was not shared equally among competing groups, aggravating existing socioeconomic disparities. With strong ties to both East and West, the Christian community was the primary beneficiary of the transformation of the country into a banking, trade, and tourism center. The Sunnis benefited to a lesser degree from economic development; however, the Shia community became something of a permanent underclass in Lebanese society. The Shiites in Iraq were also the underclass under Saddam, but they would become the privileged political and economic community if the Lebanese model were applied to Iraq. The Sunni minority, which has dominated Iraqi politics since independence, would likely find this intolerable. In turn, the Kurdish minority, in conjunction with demands for autonomy, has shown interest and determination in preserving some element of control over the oil resources in northern Iraq.

The competing political forces in Lebanon, unable to accommodate conflicting demands with the existing polit-

ical system, eventually turned to outside forces for assistance in maintaining or enhancing their domestic political positions. Both Israel and Syria intervened in Lebanon, and the United States and Western Europe later participated in a multilateral peacekeeping force. Iran and Iraq also supported proxy forces in the country. After the U.S. embassy and marine barracks were targeted by suicide bombers in 1983, the United States withdrew its forces; but Syria remains today a dominant player in Lebanese politics. A Balkanized Iraq would present similar threats to and opportunities for the vital interests of Arab states (Jordan, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Syria) and non-Arab states (Iran, Israel, Turkey), together with Great Britain, the Soviet Union, and the United States. An extensive period of foreign intervention in the domestic politics of Iraq would destabilize the entire region.

Iraqi Solution Needed

The sectarian political system adopted by Lebanon in 1943 is not a viable model for Iraq. It is the wrong system in the wrong place at the wrong time. The White House's suggestion that it might help bring order out of chaos is simply another disheartening example of the absence of Middle East experience and understanding within the Bush administration. The Iraqi people need to work out a political solution for themselves, a solution that includes the active participation of opposition elements within the country. And Washington needs to stop intervening in the Iraqi political process and be prepared to accept the formula the Iraqis decide to adopt. That's called democracy.

Ronald Bruce St John, an analyst for Foreign Policy in Focus, has published widely on Middle Eastern issues. His latest book on the region is Libya and the United States: Two Centuries of Strife (Penn Press, 2002).

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