



ACSC Quick-Look

Catalyst for Air & Space Power Research Dialogue



Lebanon: Consociation, Civil War, and the Search for Stability

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Background. In the three decades following independence from France in 1943, Lebanon was considered to be a model of a pluralistic, progressive, and moderate state in the Arab world. The achievements of the Lebanese state appeared all the more remarkable given the deeply divided nature of Lebanese society. With the onset of a 15-year civil war in 1975, however, the Lebanese model quickly took a darker meaning, signifying violent internal conflict exacerbated by external intervention leading eventually to a failed state. Since 1990, as a result, in part, of a large-scale Syrian presence in Lebanon, some measure of stability has returned. This stability, unfortunately, is probably more akin to an extended ceasefire rather than a political settlement as the basic issues that fueled the civil war in the first place have remained unresolved. Rather than offer a direct model that offers positive lessons that could in some way be applied to Iraq today, Lebanon instead offers a cautionary tale of problems to avoid if the US-led occupation of Iraq is to launch a stable and pluralistic regime in Baghdad.

Historical Background. The modern history of Lebanon as an independent state begins with the so-called National Pact in 1943. This informal and unwritten agreement was designed to deal with the fractious nature of Lebanese society by dividing power along “confessional” lines. In essence, all government jobs were allotted based upon religious identity. For example, that the President of Lebanon would always be a Maronite Christian, the Prime Minister would always be a Sunni Muslim, the Speaker of the Parliament would always be a Shia, the Defense Minister would be a Druze, etc. Seats in Parliament were similarly allotted along confessional lines; for every six Christian representatives, there would be five Muslim representatives and those Muslim representatives would be further divided into Sunni, Shia and Druze. These numbers and the predominance they gave to the Maronites were based upon a 1932 census that gave the Christians a six to five majority in the country.

This consociational system eventually collapsed under the twin pressures of demographic changes and Lebanon being pulled into the morass of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Over time, due to differential birthrates, it became clear that the Christian majority had disappeared, but the allotment of government positions remained frozen. In addition, influxes of large numbers of Palestinians, mostly Sunni Muslims, following the Arab-Israeli wars as well as the civil war in Jordan, eventually proved too much for the political system to accommodate, and Lebanon descended into civil war; a civil war that also prompted Syrian and Israeli direct interventions as well as their support for proxy forces.

The civil war came to an end in 1989-1990 through a series of agreements between the Lebanese factions and the Syrians. The most important of these agreements was the Taif Agreement, negotiated under Saudi auspices by a plurality of the remaining parliamentarians from the last set of elections in 1972. The Taif accord stuck closely to Lebanon’s confessional system, making only marginal changes, such as reducing the powers of the Christian President, increasing the power of the Sunni Prime Minister and the Shia Speaker of the Parliament, and equalizing the numbers of Christian and Muslim representatives in Parliament. The agreement also legitimized the presence of Syrian forces by tasking them with assisting the Lebanese government in re-exerting its control over the country. The Taif accord put a two-year limit on Syria’s presence, but in 1991 Syria and Lebanon signed a “Brotherhood Treaty” that extended and re-formalized Syria’s dominant position in Lebanon (the United States also gave tacit approval to the Syrian presence in Lebanon as part of American efforts to construct the 1990-1991 Gulf War coalition). Although Syria has recently decreased the number of troops it stations in Lebanon, those troops still number close to 15,000 and Syria remains the power broker in Lebanon. The Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon in May of 2000 did little to shake Syria’s hold on the country, a hold that remains strong despite some local opposition to the Syrian presence and recent vocal condemnation of the Syrian occupation emanating from Washington and Paris.

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Implications for Operations in Iraq. In some ways the Lebanese case offers an interesting parallel for thinking about the situation in Iraq today. In both cases you have a deeply divided society attempting to rule itself in a situation that has spurred and is likely to continue to spur foreign intervention. The differences between the two cases are also stark, the two most obvious being that Lebanon was largely a peripheral power in its neighborhood where Iraq is a major player in its and whereas Lebanon was primarily a civil war that spurred some foreign intervention, Iraq is a case of a full scale invasion leading to an increased risk of a civil war. Given these similarities and differences, the following implications appear relevant:

- Although the consociational, “confessional” system worked for some time in Lebanon, its liabilities outweigh its assets in thinking about it as a possible model for the future of Iraq with a similar division of powers between Kurd, Sunni and Shia. The confessional system reinforced local identities, undermined the development of a strong national identity, and proved unable to adapt to demographic changes. In Lebanon, it became a short-term solution that ultimately exacerbated the underlying conflicts within the society. The lesson here is that any thoughts of using these aspects of the Lebanon model for Iraq should be avoided.
- The success of Syria in bringing some stability to Lebanon is also of limited value as a model for the Iraqi case today. Even though Syria’s presence gained some measure of local, regional and international legitimacy (or at least acquiescence), simple fatigue from fifteen years of civil war probably explain the recent stability as much as the Syrian presence. Obviously, letting the factions in Iraq fight it out for the next 15 years would also not be considered a positive outcome.
- There is no regional power that could play the Syrian role in Iraq today. The Syrians, the Saudis, and the Jordanians lack the resources and the Turks and the Iranians would be unacceptable to other regional players and some of the Iraqi factions. While a United Nations or a European Union force could potentially achieve some level of legitimacy, such forces would probably be unwilling or unable to adopt the types of strong arm tactics the Syrians have used in Lebanon or to invest the time and resources Syria has devoted to its position in Lebanon.
- Finally, the Syrian presence in Lebanon has not advanced Lebanon toward a long-term political solution for its domestic problems, beyond the breathing room a ceasefire produces.