

Peace in Lebanon and the Middle East

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Lebanon has never experienced an extended interval of sustainable peace since its independence. In 1975, Lebanon was the scene of a civil war. In 1982, a full-scale war was mounted by Israel. In the process massacres were perpetrated by the Israelis. The current crisis has been punctuated by momentous tragic events which brought salient changes in the sordid course of life in the country, unleashing a prolonged cabinet crisis, and finally an intricate, highly critical discord over the election of a new president. It was no accident that so many spots of tension are boiling at the same time in the Middle East in Lebanon, in Palestine, in Iraq, and in Sudan. The conventional wisdom is that, in the final analysis, Palestine lies at the core of all the mayhem. The linkage between the repeated Lebanese crises and the Palestinian issue is only too obvious. The proclivity of Arab officialdom is to negotiate within the context of what is known as the Arab initiative. The Euro–American declared position is that any negotiations should be conducted in accordance with the Road Map sponsored by the Quartet. Both initiatives leave a lot to be desired.

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Lebanon

Lebanon has never experienced an extended interval of sustainable peace since its independence in 1943.

In 1952 the President of the Republic, Bshara El Khouri, who had won the honor of being a leading independence hero along with the Prime Minister at the time, Riad El Solh, was forced to resign after an illicit extension of his presidential mandate in 1949 through an equivocal constitutional amendment. The extension set in motion a political crisis that culminated in the President’s resignation.

In 1958, a violent turmoil broke out in the country against a backdrop of a regional-international conflict, pitting what was known as the Baghdad Pact, led by the United States of America, against a world non-aligned coalition spearheaded in the Middle East at large, and more specifically in Lebanon, by the Nasserite movement, led and inspired by president Gamal Abdul Nasser of Egypt. Lebanon turned into an arena of bloody violence for almost a whole year. The Lebanese were proxies to protagonists in a regional-international war.

In 1967, an Arab–Israeli war broke out, in which Lebanon was not officially an active participant, yet it found itself politically and emotionally on the side of the defeated Arab front by virtue of its Arab identity and alignment. It had its share of the fallout of the war, including a massive inflow of Palestinian refugees into its hinterland. Lebanon also had its share of the acute tension that permeated the whole

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region in the aftermath of the disastrous war, with adverse repercussions on the economy of Lebanon which has always been marked with dependence on Arab trade, finance, and tourism.

In 1973, there was again a major regional war pitting Egypt and Syria against Israel, the final outcome of which was perhaps somewhat favorable to the Israeli side, and ultimately led to the signing of the 1979 peace agreement between Egypt and Israel at Camp David, marking a major turning point in the course of the Arab–Israeli struggle, and wreaking havoc with the integrity of the Arab front in that struggle as it entailed a breakdown of basic parameters in the long-established Arab position.

Lebanon, hosting some 400,000 Palestinian refugees, dwelling mostly in scattered camps in various parts of the country, soon developed into a smoldering cauldron of malaise, disenchantment, rejection, and paramilitary activism against the belligerent state across the Lebanese–Israeli border in the South.

In 1975, Lebanon was the scene of a violent conflagration, a civil war pitting Lebanese national movement factions and Palestinian militants on one side, against rightist, mostly Christian, factions, on the other. The war lasted for over fifteen years, from 1975 to 1990, exacting an egregious amount of bloodshed, destruction, displacement of people, and immeasurable human suffering. A tragic sequel was punctuated by momentous events: the deployment of Syrian forces in Lebanon in response to an appeal by the President of the Republic at the time, Suleiman Franjeh, on behalf of his Christian coalition which embraced a notorious former President of the Republic, Kamil Chamoun, and a leader of the Phalange party, Pierre Jemayel. The Syrian armed forces initially fought on the Christian side against the national movement–Palestinian coalition. But before long positions changed, and the Syrians found themselves engaged in the armed struggle on the side of the Palestinian–national movement coalition bloc against the aforementioned Christian alliance. The southern borders with Israel were throughout the scene of exchanges of fire, bombardment and reciprocal incursions. The deteriorating situation culminated in a full-scale invasion of the South of Lebanon in 1978, which prompted the UN Security Council to issue Resolution 425, declaring a cessation of hostilities and calling for the immediate withdrawal of the Israeli occupiers from Lebanon. The resolution was not implemented; a cease-fire was observed but the Israelis did not vacate the land they had occupied.

In 1982, a full-scale war was mounted by Israel against Lebanon, eventually leading to an Israeli siege then brief occupation of the capital city of Beirut. In the process massacres were perpetrated by the Israelis and their rightist Lebanese allies, the most devastating being the Sabra and Shatila massacre which exacted an appalling death toll among Palestinian camp dwelling refugees.

The Lebanese war ended eventually with the Taef Accord, signed in 1989 by Lebanese parliamentarians from various factions in the city of Taef in Saudi Arabia. The convention was organized by a tripartite Arab summit committee spearheaded by Saudi Arabia. The Taef Accord provisions, which laid down sweeping political reforms, were incorporated into the constitution of Lebanon in 1990.

A spell of domestic tranquility ensued, which lasted practically until 2004. The Syrian armed forces maintained an exceedingly assertive presence throughout at the security and political levels. The Syrian intelligence apparatus played a domineering, provocative role in public life. Most notable was their blatant intervention to secure a three-year extension of the mandate of President Elias Hrawi in 1996 and again of President Emile Lahoud in 2004.

The latter extension came in the wake of UN Security Council resolution 1559, which called for the withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanon and for the free democratic election of a new president. That episode marked the beginning of a major national crisis which Lebanon has been increasingly enduring until now.

The current crisis has been punctuated by momentous tragic events which brought about salient changes in the sordid course of life in the country, including the atrocious assassination of former prime minister Rafik Hariri, a series of explosions and murders which targeted outstanding political and media figures, a succession of massive and tumultuous demonstrations by both sides in the streets of Beirut, the precipitous withdrawal of the Arab Syrian forces from Lebanon, a ravaging war waged by Israel against Lebanon in the summer of 2006, withdrawal of a weighty party from the cabinet unleashing a prolonged cabinet crisis, and finally an intricate, highly critical discord over the election of a new president before the end of 2007.

The Middle East

It was no accident that so many spots of tension are boiling at the same time: in Lebanon, in Palestine, in Iraq, in Sudan, and at the outskirts of the region in Afghanistan and Pakistan, while Syria and Iran are being exposed to diverse enormous pressures and threats.

The conventional wisdom is that, in the final analysis, Palestine lies at the core of all the mayhem in the region. Lebanon is home to some 400,000 Palestinian refugees, most of them living in camps, of which twelve now remain in various parts of the country. The Palestinian refugees long for a homeland of their own to be established on Palestinian soil, and aspire to return one day to their own country. The right of return has been spelled out in resolution 194 of the UN General Assembly issued in 1948 and reaffirmed year in year out in later resolutions, but the Resolution remains pending, unheeded by Israel and the world community. Nevertheless, the Palestinian refugees insist on its implementation, as do all the Arabs committed to the Palestinian cause. The refugees' right to return to the homes from which they were evicted by force is regarded as a basic human right, and equally as a natural right in a nationalist context. Hence, while Palestine is at the core of the Middle East problem, the right of refugees to return lies at the core of the Palestinian question. Hence the conviction on the Arab side that any credible, lasting solution to the Palestinian issue presupposes focusing on UN resolution 194.

The problem is with the Israeli position that will not countenance any possibility of acknowledging the refugees' right of return, claiming that this would dilute or detract from the Jewish character of the Israeli state. Hence the stalemate.

Another major issue obstructing progress toward a solution is that of Jerusalem. The city was occupied by Israel in the 1967 war, and Israel soon declared its annexation to the Zionist entity. The Palestinians insist on Arab Jerusalem being the capital of any prospective Palestinian entity. So do all Arabs. Yet, the Israelis have flagrantly defied the legitimate Arab claims to the city by pursuing a policy of building Jewish settlements within the Arab sector and around it, and also by making life more and more difficult for the population, compelling increasing numbers of them to migrate over the years. It is noteworthy that the international community has never acknowledged the Israeli occupation or annexation of Arab Jerusalem. UN Security Council Resolution 242, issued in the wake of the 1967 war,

called upon Israel to withdraw from all occupied Palestinian territories including Arab Jerusalem.

As in Jerusalem, the Israelis ventured into a large scale effort aimed at planting settlements in the Arab West Bank and the Gaza Strip, squeezing the Arab population into a corner. Furthermore, they tore up lines of communication throughout the Arab territory by setting up road blocks ostensibly for security reasons, thereby contributing to a paralysis in the economic life of the Palestinian society and to a very damaging discredit of the Palestinian elected authority.

From the general Arab perspective, Palestine is the incarnation of an egregious historic calamity perpetrated by the Zionists under the aegis of the UN in connivance with the major powers, including the superpower, the USA. The Palestinian tragedy has been, ever since, the mainstay of rage throughout the Arab world and of turbulence and instability in the whole Middle East region, giving rise to upheavals, coups d'état, and all kinds of agitation, not to mention recurrent Arab–Israeli devastating wars.

The miserable plight of the Palestinian diaspora throughout the Arab world, particularly in the Middle East, and the utterly destitute living conditions which the overwhelming majority of them have to endure, stand out as a constant reminder of a profound affliction and wild injustice suffered by the Arab nation.

The harm can be redressed, and a modicum of tranquility and stability restored, only via a fair peace settlement. The gridlock lies in the fact that what is fair from the Arab perspective sounds utterly unacceptable to the Israelis, and that the international community, including the major powers and, more particularly, the superpower, betrays extreme bias in favor of Israel against the Arabs, in seemingly complete disregard for a grave human tragedy and national injustice.

There is a deep prevailing sentiment in the Arab world now that native, indigenous Palestinians may well live in peace side by side with Jewish immigrants who have flocked in from various parts of the world, but displacement of the native indigenous inhabitants so that alien immigrants may occupy their homes and land is as intolerable as it is inconceivable.

The linkage between the repeated Lebanese crises and the Palestinian issue is only too obvious. The question remains: how is the Iraqi tragedy related to Palestine? The clue is to be found in Israel's interests in what has befallen Iraq.

The American invasion was justified by two allegations: the supposed possession by Iraq of weapons of mass destruction, and the supposed link between the Iraqi regime and the Al-Qaeda terrorist organization. It was to be revealed by the Americans soon after the occupation that there was in fact no evidence to confirm the validity of either allegation. The American propaganda machine has since been redirected to promoting the feigned rationale of instilling freedom and democracy in an erstwhile despotically ruled country. This rationalization was of course untenable. For how can freedom and democracy be established by occupation or by force of arms?

Besides, the US administration is not renowned for a credible record of supporting freedom and democracy outside the USA. The Hamas victory in democratic elections conducted in Palestine was an outstanding case in point. The US administration spared no means to thwart the experiment, including a siege and starvation drive—this in addition to the American administration's unflinching support for autocratic regimes in the Arab world and elsewhere.

The baffling question remains: why then did the invasion of Iraq take place? We can presume only one answer: to serve a Zionist objective. Iraq had long been the

source of a potential, or at least latent, threat to Israel's security. The occupation had the effect of eliminating that threat altogether. It is no secret that the Israeli intelligence is highly active inside occupied Iraq, possibly engineering and catalyzing much of the mayhem in it.

The dire truth is that Israel stands out as the only state in the world without definitive borders, and it looks as though it is determined not to draw final borders, espousing a policy of continuous expansion by building Jewish settlements on Arab land in Palestine.

Peace initiatives

The American administration is not regarded as innocent of the agonies gripping the Middle East. Too many among the Arabs suspect Israeli complicity in the American proposition the administration sponsors under the label of 'the greater (or the new) Middle East'. If the American vision is to be discerned in what is befalling Iraq under American occupation, one would infer that the American plan is to fragment the states of the region into mini-entities based on confessional or ethnic grounds. Perhaps the only existing entity that is not liable to fragmentation is Israel due to the strong Jewish bond between its citizens. It dreams of becoming the dominant force in a decimated region.

This impression is further bolstered by a heresy that recurs in the American policy lexicon, as high ranking officials in the administration tout what they name as creative chaos. Chaos can obviously be seen as a destructive phenomenon, but when chaos is seen as creative, it becomes an objective to be pursued. Is this what the American administration is doing in our region?

With regard to peace, one may recall two so-called peace agreements signed by Israel in the past, the first with Egypt in 1979 and the other with Jordan in 1994. We prefer to call the context in both cases a settlement, rather than peace proper. The nuance is in our view in the fact that both agreements led to an end to armed hostilities with Israel, but did not lead to a real normalization of relations, as both were supposed to do. Evidently, peace in the Middle East cannot be truncated; it is not a piece-meal proposition. Sustainable peace can be achieved only as a comprehensive accord, taking in all Arab countries, particularly those in the vicinity of Palestine. The Annapolis peace conference held towards the end of 2007 at the behest of President George W. Bush was intended to jump start Palestinian-Israeli peace negotiations. If those negotiations should succeed, full peace in the Middle East would not be accomplished unless at least Syria and Lebanon were engaged.

On the Arab side, all so-called confrontation parties are avowedly ready to reach a settlement with Israel. The Palestinian Authority, in the person of Mahmoud Abbas, has ceaselessly called for a settlement. So has Syrian President Bashar Asad, declaring repeatedly that he is ready to sign on to recover the Golan Heights. In Lebanon there was a long public squabble over the question. The Maronite Patriarch aptly summed up the consensus by announcing that Lebanon would be the last, not the first, to sign. This implies that Lebanon will be prepared to sign but only after Syria, perhaps only an hour later.

The proclivity of Arab officialdom is to negotiate within the context of what is known as the Arab initiative, first adopted at an inter-Arab summit held in Beirut, Lebanon, in 2002, and subsequently re-launched by a summit held in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, in 2007.

The Euro–American declared position is that any negotiations should be conducted in accordance with the so called ‘Road Map’ which had been sponsored by a Quartet comprising the USA, the European Union, Russia, and the UN.

I am personally one of those who maintain that both approaches are sure to be counter-productive and might end as an exercise in futility.

The Quartet’s Road Map comprises three stages. In the first the Palestinians are to end their armed resistance to the Israeli occupation and surrender their weapons. The second stage provides for assorted auxiliary measures. The third and final stage, which is the crucial one, calls for negotiating a peace deal.

The fundamental drawback in this approach, from the Arab standpoint, lies in the fact that the Palestinian interlocutor now has only one negotiating card in his hand—the Intifada, i.e. the armed resistance to occupation, in other words it is Israel’s security. The Palestinian negotiator would supposedly give up that card in return for all his demands: i.e. a sovereign, contiguous state with Arab Jerusalem as its capital, liberation of all occupied land, and last but not least recognition of the right of the refugees to return to their homes. If the Palestinian negotiator gave up the resistance card at the start of the process, as the Road Map requires, he would come to the negotiations in the final stage with nothing in his hand to negotiate for or to trade with. He would virtually be more a supplicant than a negotiator. Hence the conviction that the Road Map is a straightforward recipe for surrender, from the Arab perspective.

The Arab initiative may also be substantively counterproductive. It calls for the establishment of a Palestinian state along the 1967 pre-war borders with Israel, with Jerusalem as its capital. It also calls for recognition of the right of return of the refugees. The fault line in this formula is the presumption that recovery of the 1967 borders would solve the whole problem, as though there had been no problem between Arabs and Israelis before 1967. Had this been the case, why did a war break out in that year in the first place?

A more significant flaw is that the Arab initiative starts the bidding with a compromise, i.e. half a solution. The Israelis will certainly bicker over it and draw the Arabs into a compromise on the compromise, which would lead to half a settlement, that is to a much diminished solution. Such a formula will therefore not produce real peace. A more rational approach would be to start negotiations with one’s maximum demands in the hope of reaching a reasonable and fair settlement.

The call for recognition of the right of return is a very positive provision in the text. The prevalent mood in Arab officialdom, however, including the Palestinian Authority, does not assure full and absolute adherence to the right of all Palestinian refugees to return to all of Palestine, i.e. before it was split. That is indeed the implication of UN resolution 194. Arab, including Palestinian, officials are bent on reaching ‘a fair settlement’ of the refugees issue, and not necessarily their return. Compensation and resettlement outside Palestine are often alluded to.

I am one of those who believe that Arabs and Jews should live peacefully side by side in a unified Palestine. The cornerstone of sustainable peace is the right of all Palestinian refugees to return to their homes in all of historic Palestine. If the Israelis insist on a two-state solution, which is to be expected, the Arabs cannot, even if the two states are set up along the 1967 line, compromise on the right of return of all refugees to all of former Palestine, as per resolution 194.

If that kind of a solution is reached, real peace would be accomplished in the Middle East and all tension would be swept away, even in such trouble-spots as Palestine, Lebanon, Iraq, as well as the rest of the Arab world.

Concluding remarks

As to Lebanon, which is characterized by an abundance of freedoms but little democracy, stability will be consolidated and the recurrence of national crises will cease permanently once the ill of sectarianism is remedied, the spirit of civic awareness is enhanced, and effective democratic practice and democratic culture are further developed. The reform process is to be kick-started with an election legislation which would ensure true and fair representation as well as effective accountability.

Finally, we look forward to a day when the Arab world will rally into a union, along the lines of the European Community, and wish that Beirut will emerge as the Brussels of the Arabs. After all, the Arabs should be no less amenable than the Europeans to joining ranks by virtue of some vital binding factors, including a single language, long common heritage, and commonality of strategic interests, some of which are lacking in the European Community, and the history of Europe over the past few centuries was marred by devastating wars, including the two world wars during the twentieth century.

The USA would not have been a great world power, not to say a superpower, had it not united in a federal republic. Europe would not have assumed its current notable and promising status had not the European states rallied into a powerful union. So it is with the Arab world. It will not be an effective force on the world scene and will remain subject to abuse and exploitation and schemes of fragmentation until the Arab states follow the steps of Europe in coming together into a confederation and thence into some form of union.