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## Christian Decline and Models of Lebanon

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### Executive Summary

The history of the Lebanese Christians, especially the Maronites among them, is a drama of struggle against the forces of Islam and Arabism. After the outbreak of the war in Lebanon in 1975, the embattled Christians suffered a loss of power and numbers that culminated in Syrian invasion and occupation of much of the country. The fate of Lebanon and the Christians of the Middle East has been in a precarious and deteriorating condition ever since.

This policy paper examines the character of Lebanon according to four political models. One is the *dhimmi* paradigm whereby the subjugated Christians, no less in this era of powerful Islamic resurgence, face Muslim rule and the veritable Islamization of Lebanon which once served as a native homeland of Oriental Christianity. A second model, yet related to the first, posits Syrian occupation as the fundamental framework of Lebanese life leading to the Syrianization of the country's security, political, economic, and educational domains. A third model for Lebanon considers the Israeli connection which evolved into an intimate national relationship and a tight military bond, however lapsing to some degree since the 1980s. And lastly, we examine the feasibility of a Christian-led Lebanese national struggle against Hizballah and Syrian hegemonic rule that would mount a military and political resistance movement from within Lebanon and from abroad. The base of active operations would be southern Lebanon with the Southern Lebanese Army serving as the spearhead of an offensive strategy against Islamic and Syrian forces.

Two conditions in particular can make a Free Lebanon a true political possibility. One is the instability which may strike at a post-Assad regime in Damascus, and the second, a renewed Israeli commitment to support a Lebanese Christian national struggle. A viable and successful southern Lebanese resistance can also provide the foundation for Israel's military withdrawal as a prudent policy option.

Ultimately, only the free Lebanese can liberate themselves and no outside power can, or should, do the job for them■

# Christian Decline and Models of Lebanon

*Mordechai Nisan*

The history of Lebanon reflects a recurring search for coherence between society and state in local and regional terms, and an ongoing quandary of ambiguity regarding the country's cultural self-definition between East and West. Lebanon neither conformed to a Hegelian conception of the state as a unifying mechanism and arbiter of conflicting social interests; nor the Weberian definition of the state as the possessor of a monopoly of the means of violence. Millian liberalism co-existed with Actonian multi-ethnicity, but without achieving peace, harmony, and order as the fruits of such high-minded ideas. A clear definition of the nation and the political order still elude ancient Lebanon in the contemporary era.

Various models of Lebanon, which provided a certain conceptual clarity of the country in the past, have dissolved during the last quarter of the century. One such model, implemented by the founding of Greater Lebanon in 1920 and the enactment of the National Pact of 1943, provided for Christian political primacy in the context of power-sharing among Lebanon's constituent communities. But the 1975 war sent that model based on a subtle Christian-Muslim balance into the fires of Beirut. Another model based on centuries of French patronage of the Maronite community and Vatican tutelage of the Maronite church conceived of Lebanon as a European enclave in the Muslim East. However, the end of imperialism on the one hand, with the rise of Arab nationalism and political Islam on the other, diminished significantly the model of Lebanon as a Western protectorate. A model of Lebanon as a violent crucible for Palestinian revolution was ended by the Israeli invasion and the expulsion of PLO fighters in 1982.

Lebanon today seeks its identity and role while encased within a spiritual and political desert. The idea that Lebanon is a crossroads between Orient and Occident, exhibiting a rich synthesis of civilizations, strikes a chord of mission.<sup>1</sup> But how this can be incorporated into a new political reality remains elusive. Lebanon's geography itself expresses the country's dilemma for it contains both an inward-looking mountain refuge and the outward-looking Beirut coastal connection to the world beyond. For Lebanon's resonance and spirit are two-fold, and particularly so for its Maronite Christians: their mountain as a religious homeland is reflected in their insular character, but their outlet to the sea (as it was for the Phoenicians) offers opportunity and salvation with ties to Europe and the rest of the world. Latinized and Europeanized, ever-wary of Arabization and Islamization, the Christian Maronites shaped their identity at home and abroad with cautious confidence.<sup>2</sup> Different from the regional regime norm of political autocracy, Lebanon was traditionally an island of personal liberty.

The Maronites have inhabited Mount Lebanon since the fifth century, enjoying periods of independence, but suffering long periods of precarious vulnerability in the face of a generally hostile Muslim environment. The memory of massacre and a consciousness of weakness grip Maronite minds until today. The slaughter of Christians in Deir al-Kamar and Hasbaya between 1841 to 1860 was virtually repeated between 1975 until 1990 in the massacres at Damour, Aiyshieh, and Ba'abda. The Maronites' minority predicament has led them to adopt tactical double-talk and flattery to fend off enemies, while yet confronting the painful reality of not having trust in allies. At various times, the Ottomans, the French, the Americans, and the Israelis abandoned the Christians.

The problem of reconciling the model of a Christian Lebanon with the demographics of a pluralistic confessional society remains at the heart of a complex political dilemma. There is an entrenched idea that the Christians constitute a 'political majority', despite their decline to but a slight statistical majority in the 1940s and a minority by the 1980s. This non-democratic concept is daring though highly problematic, and the Muslims cannot, seemingly, accept this turn of phrase. Certainly the Shi'as have lurched forward in demographic terms: the number of 200,000 in the late 1940s tripled to close to 600,000 according to official figures in the early 1990s – or closer to 900,000 according to more unofficial estimates.<sup>3</sup> If the Shi'as are approximately one-third of the Lebanese population, and overall the Muslims number more than 55 percent, the backsliding Christians will with difficulty convince others of their claimed or acclaimed dominant political status. Yet, the results of the parliamentary elections in the summer of 1996 and the municipality elections in the spring of 1997 offer a picture of a still sturdy Christian presence and participation. Maronite Christians were elected from Tripoli, Zgharta, and Becharre in the north, through to Kesraoun and the Matn in the center, and the Shouf and Jezzine regions toward the south.<sup>4</sup> This indicates that the political tide in Lebanon, though flowing constantly, has not yet entered on its final and definitive course.

The consideration of evolving and possible models of Lebanon must first account for the basic Christian decline with a specific focus on the Maronite community, as this provides the context from which to assess the future. The past is history, and certainly in the Middle East is an abiding factor, but the future emerging from the new contemporary circumstances will offer a new image of Lebanon.

### **Christian Decline**

Periods of relative growth, security, and independence in Christian, in particular Maronite Christian, history in Lebanon have alternated with periods of repression, loss, and flight. During the nineteenth century, the Maronites were confident and free in the 1830s, but battered in the 1840s. Toward the latter part of the century signs of economic consolidation and relative collective freedom intermixed with trepidation of Muslim recrudescence, Turkish venality, and emigration abroad.<sup>5</sup> By World War I about one-third of all Lebanese had left the homeland.

The establishment of *Le Grand Liban* provided a vista for Christian political domination and internal expansion under the watchful eye of French mandatory rule. This launched the Maronites toward the founding of a Christian state within and despite the Muslim-Syrian-Arab surroundings. But the National Pact of 1943 represented a communal compromise which, though sanctifying both Christian presidential rule and parliamentary advantage, symbolized that Lebanon would not be a purist Christian entity. Two years later, with the founding of the League of Arab States in Cairo, Lebanon maintained its official independence while accepting its place within the Arab world. The "opening to the Arab world", as Pierre Gemayel declared and his son Amin would confirm, was to be a central feature of the Lebanese regional reality.<sup>6</sup> Politics and economics were decisive factors in this integrationist approach propagated by many Christians in Lebanon.

The delicate confessional equilibrium in Lebanon decayed and ultimately dissolved in conjunction with some very formidable developments. The crisis and civil war of 1958 strengthened the pan-Arab Nasserite forces and Muslim militias that threatened Lebanon's Western leanings and Christian character. With PLO penetration and presence on the rise, the government of Beirut signed the Cairo Accords in 1969 that vitiated Lebanese sovereignty in some southern and coastal parts of the country. In 1975 the (civil) war erupted, as the

Palestinian-leftist forces challenged the integrity of the state and its Christian leadership. A year later, following a request by some Lebanese leaders no less, Syria's military intervention assumed a hegemonic presence which undermined Lebanese independence, initially in some northern and eastern Biq'a areas, and later toward the Shouf and Beirut itself. Two seminal Syrian events encapsulated the take-over of Lebanon: the assassination of president-elect Bashir Gemayel on September 14, 1982 and the occupation of the presidential palace at Ba'abda culminating in the defeat of Prime Minister General Michel Aoun and the Lebanese Army on October 13, 1990. First the Palestinians and then the Syrians brought down the Christian power structure, overturning Christian Maronite domination, and elevating the role of the Muslims, both Sunni and Shi'a (and Druze), in a power struggle that was determined by strangers from the outside. During the fifteen years of civil war, 900,000 Lebanese (not all Christians), or approximately one-third of the total population, fled abroad. Lebanese Christian history will be written in Paris and Montreal, Melbourne and Miami, if the exiled *émigrés* will be unwilling or unable to return home.<sup>7</sup>

Christian decline was also a result of intra-Maronite rivalry that assumed violent fratricidal proportions. Diversity and disunity characterized the arena of Christian militias, that included: the large Phalange/Kataeb militia headed by the Gemayels, the Chamoun *Ahrar* Tigers, the Franjiyya Maradas, Georges Adouane's Tanzim, and Etienne Sakr's (Abu Arz) Guardians of the Cedars. The concomitant Christian political party sector, parallel to the military organizations, was equally fissured.<sup>8</sup> The consequence of Maronite diversity descended into a tribal war led, in particular, by Bashir Gemayel who sought to impose authoritarian rule over all clans, factions, parties, and militias. The founding of the Lebanese Front and the Lebanese Forces (LF) signified a level of coordination and unity; but the price over time was excessive. Phalangist/Gemayel warfare against the Franjiyyes and the Chamouns left a trail of blood as Maronites murdered Maronites in gangland warfare style. This internecine feud later assumed even more portentous dimensions in two contexts: the struggle over the leadership of the Lebanese Forces in the 1980s, and the Christian civil war between Michel Aoun's Lebanese Army and Samir Geagea's LF in 1990. The latter struggle divested the Maronites of unity and power, while facilitating the major Syrian conquest and occupation beginning on October 13, 1990. Together, atomized clannish *asabiyya* and Syrian expansionism decimated the Christian enclave and entity in Lebanon.

Christian decline assumed its political nadir with the Syrian-orchestrated Ta'if Accord from October 24, 1989. In the spirit of the Constitutional Document that Damascus had proposed back in 1976, the Ta'if document reduced the authority of the Maronite Christian president, elevated the stature of the Sunni Prime Minister, and provided for a tri-presidential regime that included the Shi'i speaker of the legislature. The parliamentary balance was to reflect an equal number of Christian and Muslim representatives. It was strikingly evident that the Christian community was reduced to the status of a mere minority and no more than one among the various confessional groups. It would no longer be even "first among equals", nor would it even be equal to the Muslim community. The Ta'if Accord also reaffirmed Lebanon's identity as an Arab country.

The political and military subjugation of Christian Lebanon transformed the country into a veritable Syrian protectorate. "Greater Syria" became a formal reality through the instrumentality of the Treaty of Brotherhood, Cooperation, and Coordination between Lebanon and Syria on May 22, 1991, along with a long list of subsequent accords. Syria's incremental and de facto annexation of Lebanon was buttressed by the presence of at least 35,000 Syrian occupation troops with control over the security and intelligence apparatus (*mukhabarat*). Syria had brought oppression and order to Beirut and the country: an end to

civil war and the imposition of foreign domination. Ghazi Kana'an, Syria's highest security official in Lebanon, assumed the role of military strongman, as Syrian President Hafez al-Assad personally chose Elias Hrawi as the nominal Christian Maronite President of Lebanon. With the influx of anywhere from 300,000 to over one million Syrian workers into the Lebanese labor market, and the acquisition by large numbers of Syrians of Lebanese citizenship, Lebanon was occupied and colonized in a sweeping transformation of the country. Hundreds of thousands of Christians became refugees from their homes and towns in the Shouf, in Iqlim east of Sidon, while non-Christians have been settled in Christian regions like Kesraoun and Jbayl. The exile of traditional Christian leaders, like Michel Aoun and Amin Gemayel in Paris; the flight of Abu Arz southward to Jezzine; the imprisonment of Samir Geagea and lesser known personalities arrested and tortured in Syrian jails, with hundreds of others kidnapped – had left the Christian community in chaos and disarray. No less pertinent was the inauguration of a new Syrian-directed education policy that called for unification with Lebanon and the teaching of Lebanon's Arab character, in accordance with Damascus' determination to uproot, certainly to dilute, the historic identity of the Land of the Cedars.<sup>9</sup>

The irony of Lebanon's condition is that it has finally acquired a strong state apparatus that can forcibly adjudicate societal rivalries, but at the price of forfeiting indigenous Christian vitality and autonomous leadership. Without war and politics Lebanon can perhaps devote itself to some of its traditional activities, as in education and economics.<sup>10</sup> But submerged in an Arab identity, facing Islamic integralism and Druze militancy, while subdued by Syrian integration, Lebanese decline toward the end of the twentieth-century will become the most debilitating and destructive event in all of Maronite Christian history. The long-term outcome of the Lebanese "Civil" War from 1975 could paradoxically turn out to be, not the emasculation of Lebanon, but the unalterable eradication of its Christian community.<sup>11</sup>

#### **Four Models of Lebanon**

The contours of Lebanon's political and religious future will have – and already have had – a most direct and profound impact on the Christian Maronite population. In the subsequent analysis, we propose for consideration four alternative models of Lebanon in order to highlight their ramifications on the Christians. These conceptions, rooted in immediate political realities and reflecting regional possibilities, are not all mutually exclusive even as they are cast with an eye to their particular features and intensity. As models of potentiality on the Lebanese political landscape, they also represent phases in the ups-and-downs of the Christian experience in Lebanese history.

Western-style models for Lebanon are out-dated and were perhaps never fair or accurate conceptions of the social and political character of the country. It had been commonplace, as in the writings of Pierre Rondot, to define Lebanon as a democracy as if its regime and political norms were drawn from Europe; but in fact, Christian primacy from 1926 or 1943 evolved from the indigenous founding stature of Christians in their homeland rather than from their numerical majority.<sup>12</sup> The inclination by Binder and Lerner to define Lebanon as a "confessional democracy", while acknowledging the link between religion and politics, misconstrued the abstract concept of democracy in the particular Lebanese historical setting.<sup>13</sup> The notion of "consociational democracy" based on cross-elite cooperation and coalition politics exaggerated shared confessional interests, even as Iliya Harik underestimated in writing in 1975 – the year when the civil war erupted – the embedded and sometimes violent Muslim-Christian rivalry.<sup>14</sup> Other authors who declared that the Muslims of Lebanon were

committed to democracy perceived an end for what was a means in an interminable power struggle. Latterly, the notion of the “civil society” has been proposed for Lebanon as a framework for cross-confessional harmony and free activity within an ordered polity.<sup>15</sup> Since 1989 in particular, any election procedure in Lebanon, certainly parliamentary voting for the president of the republic, is a mere transparent democratic facade for decisions taken, not in Beirut, but in Damascus.

All these conceptions of Lebanon ring of Western utopian hopes more than they reflect the subtleties of Eastern politics. And yet, now and then we encounter an example of a Westerner’s insight into the Lebanese morass of complexities and surprises. Thomas Friedman covered Lebanon as a reporter during the years of Christian decline, and Shi’a radicalization, mobilization, and empowerment. The Christians became a minority population as Muslim domination became an everyday and political reality in Beirut and beyond. But the consciousness of groups does not always conform to their status in the social nexus. Indeed, as Friedman pointed out, “the vast majority of Shiites in Lebanon just want to be Maronites...socially, politically, educationally, and materially.”<sup>16</sup> This realization survived Muslim-Christian warfare and changing political demographics, because in Lebanon some specific aspects of communal character and relations could not be identified by the formal principles of democracy. Unearthing Lebanon necessitated the skills of a cultural archeologist and not merely those of a political scientist, Western-trained.

### **1. The *Dhimmi* Paradigm**

Since the dawn of Islam and Arab conquests, the Maronite Christian people in Mount Lebanon has struggled to maintain its life, identity, and dignity living near and within Arab Muslim populations. And for that same stretch of history the Muslim forces, Omayyad, Mamluk, Ottoman, or other, have tried to impose the inferior and degrading *dhimmi* status on the Christians of the Middle East – no less the Maronites of Lebanon. Islam, during the Muslim revenge against the Crusaders, or during the Muslim revival against European imperialism, elevated the Muslim spirit as it sought to overwhelm Christian foes. Whether successful in fending off Muslim conquest or not, the Maronites of Lebanon were never relieved of the permanent threat of Islam to subdue the Christians. Some twenty active and organized Shi’a and Sunni movements in Lebanon during the 1990s served to maintain the immediacy of the Islamic threat.

The decline of the Christians in Lebanon is part of the broader historical decline of Christian communities across the region. The Armenian genocide from 1915-16, the Assyrian massacre in Iraq of 1933 and the annihilation of Christians in southern Sudan since 1955 constitute central episodes in the withering of Christianity at the hands of Muslims in this century. Tens of thousands of Lebanese Christians have been murdered by Palestinians, Syrians, and Shi’as since 1975. Copt Christians in Egypt, who have emigrated in the many tens of thousands, and among whom some two million have, moreover, fled their homes and properties since the mid-1960s, are another component of widespread Christian decline in the face of Arab nationalism and Islamic terror. The remnant of the pre-Islamic Christians in the Mideast is with ever-increasing difficulty able to remain in their countries of origin.

Just hours before his assassination on September 14, 1982, Lebanese Front Commander Bashir Gemayel gave a truly remarkable, basically improvised, speech which became posthumously his political testament. He declared that Lebanon is a land for the Christians, a platform for Christian civilization in the Orient, and a bulwark and promise for Christianity as a whole in the Middle East. After seven years of warfare, no less following Israel’s war

against the PLO and confrontation with the Syrian army, the Christians of Lebanon now had the opportunity to raise “their head high”.<sup>17</sup> Christians in Egypt and Syria could not enjoy that human liberty, and under Turkish rule in the past Christians in Lebanon were not free and equal. But from now on, declared Gemayel, “we refuse to live in *dhimmitude*” or be under anyone’s protection. Abandoning any inferiority complex, a renewed political Maronitism would affirm that the Christians of Lebanon will not go down on their knees but will keep their head high. Challenged by the Palestinians and the Syrians in Beirut itself, the Christian Maronites preserved their faith and beliefs as fighters and martyrs defending their lives and rights against foreign aggressors. But before *dhimmitude* would end, an assassin’s bomb ended Bashir Gemayel’s life.

During this period in Lebanon Hizbullah, benefiting from Iranian support, Khoumeini inspiration, and Syrian cooperation, was founded to give the militant Shi’as a vehicle for social development, religious fulfillment, and armed warfare against Israel’s military presence in Lebanon. However, another point on the agenda of Sheikhs Fadallah, Tufayli, and Nasrallah was the combined goal of removing Christian domination of Lebanon and the establishment of an Islamic republic.<sup>18</sup> A domestic political campaign against the Christians, that included efforts to diminish their parliamentary role, was accompanied by an armed campaign against the Christian-commanded militia of Sa’ad Haddad and, following his death in 1984, the Southern Lebanese Army (SLA) headed by General Antoine Lahad based in Marj’ayoun. Part of the Shi’a strategy of expansion was the intimidation of Christian villagers east of Sidon to cause their flight, in conjunction with Prime Minister Hariri’s “Greater Sidon” plan in the late 1990s designed to settle Muslims eastward to Jezzine. Hariri arranged also for the purchase of absentee-Christian lands in the area of Damur to prevent Christians from returning to their homes, and to further increase Muslim settlement south of Beirut and eastward toward the Shuf. At the same time, only 20 percent of the approximately half-million Christians who left the Mountain from 1975 have returned.<sup>19</sup> This situation is reminiscent of a pattern existing in early Islamic conquest, whereby non-Muslims were often faced with the alternative of converting to Islam or abandoning their land and fleeing. In the area of Byblos north of Beirut Shi’a settlement has been advancing.

Radical Islam that hijacked Westerners, like David Dodge and Terry Wade, and blew up United States and French military installations in Lebanon, as in 1983, was dedicated to nothing less than the imposition of a regional and global *Pax Islamica*.<sup>20</sup> This was a prescription for reinstating the *shari’a* imperative of *dhimmitude* to ensure Muslim domination and Christian inferiority under Islam. The liberation of al-Quds (Jerusalem) from Zionist usurpers was to be joined with the liberation of Beirut from Maronite oppressors.

The normative humiliation of Christians under Muslim rule is Islamically idiomatic with the political submission of a powerless *dhimmi* community. In this light we can understand, for example, the behavior of some Christians in Jezzine organized in the Mar Rukkuz Alliance, who approached Sheikh Nasrallah of Hizbullah in September, 1997 to convey their support for the Shi’a resistance against the Israeli “security zone” in southern Lebanese territory.<sup>21</sup> In the view of Anglican minister Kenneth Cragg, the Maronites were responsible for polarizing relations with the Muslims, and felt that Lebanese Christians should properly and realistically choose integration under the national umbrella of Arabism and the religious umbrella of Islam.<sup>22</sup> His promotion of pluralism was not a plea for Christian rights but, at best, Christian survival. Moreover, it was the Christian spiritual mission to remain introverted, in contrast with Islam’s evidently extroverted character as “the most political of religions”.

The spectre of *dhimmitude* in the Muslim Middle East evokes a plea for Western involvement on behalf of the Oriental Christians to counter-balance the power equation vis-a-vis Islam.

When the French government granted Michel Aoun political asylum in 1990, they made a gesture to a traditional Latin Church ally, but voiced no criticism of Syria's unprovoked conquest of Lebanon. As Bat Ye'or has argued, *dhimmitude* is not just the political condition of Christian inferiority, rather it is also the psychological condition of internalizing that submission even when the objective power relations are not detrimental, as in this case, to the Christian West.<sup>23</sup>

In 1998 the United States Congress passed the Freedom from Religious Persecution Act whose purpose is primarily to condition American foreign aid to countries which respect the religious rights of Christian minorities. This legislation, which could provide a basis to expose the abuse of Christians in Egypt and Lebanon for example, illustrates the Oriental Christian need for Western intervention on their behalf. This is an aspect of the *dhimmi* case and hoped-for salvation from afar. In 1998 the French National Assembly also passed a bill defining as genocide the Armenian tragedy of 1915-16. This carries moral and maybe political value for a decimated Christian people.

In conclusion, the *dhimmi* model for Lebanon regulates the return of the Maronite Christians to the deteriorating and dwindling collective situation they suffered during most of the Ottoman period, and prior to the launching of the Lebanese Republic under French mandatory rule in 1926. The reawakening of the power of religion, specifically Islam of course, is at the heart of the Christian predicament, while bearing the cross is at the root of their Christian destiny in the Mideast.

## 2. The Syrian Occupation

The political process leading to extensive Syrian occupation of Lebanon evolved from an ideological conviction that Lebanon is an integral part of "Greater Syria". This was grounded in the non-recognition of separate Lebanese sovereignty, as Damascus never agreed to establish diplomatic relations with Beirut. Through the decades, certainly in the first years of Lebanon's founding, Sunni Lebanese played the role of Syrian unionists, as Syria itself demanded the return of the Biq'a valley. In the 1970s, Syria's claims were translated into the hard practical stuff of military and political policy.

The outbreak of Christian-Palestinian/Muslim war in 1975 provided the opportunity for Syrian incursion into Lebanese territory. Initially as mediator in proposing the Constitutional Document on Lebanon in February, 1976, then by military penetration in northern Lebanon, Syria increased its involvement and passed a major political threshold with the introduction of 12,000 troops in June 1976. The following month, on July 20, President Assad delivered his noteworthy speech in which he declared that "through history, Syria and Lebanon have been one country and one people." In September an Arab Summit meeting confirmed Syria's military presence by euphemistically titling it the "Arab Deterrence Force". Its overwhelming number of troops, some 27,000 of a total of 30,000 were – or remained – those Syrian troops already occupying Lebanese soil.

Syrian hegemonic presence in Lebanon, despite or because of Israel's 1982 "War for the Peace of the Galilee", grew in the 1980s. It extended from the eastern Biq'a to the Shouf, and hugged the borders of Mount Lebanon. Although the 1989 Ta'if Agreement called for Syrian military withdrawal within two years time, this provision for a new and freer Lebanon was not carried out. Then, against the background of intra-Maronite civil war and the Persian Gulf crisis, Syria's army pounded the presidential palace in Ba'abda, smashing the Christian military forces, expelling General Aoun, and imposing Damascus' rule over Beirut. Thus, on



October 13, 1990, Lebanon lost any remaining semblance of its independence to a conquering neighboring state.

The consolidation of Syrian occupation of Lebanon has extended to most areas of national life. Damascus proceeded to disarm the Christian militias while taking control over the Lebanese army, once a bastion of Christian power. A Syrian army battalion is in point of fact stationed next door to the Lebanese Ministry of Defense in Beirut. Amnesty International has documented the grave abuse of human rights in Lebanon, specifically by Syria and in particular since 1990. Partisans of General Aoun, hundreds of members of the Lebanese Forces, former SLA soldiers, and other Lebanese nationals, have been arbitrarily abducted, then detained in Lebanese and Syrian prisons, denied legal representation, often with no charges laid against them. Many Lebanese nationals have simply “disappeared” in Syria. The sweeping accusation of political incitement or collaboration with Israel often follows the publication in a newspaper article or separate tract of Lebanon’s right to freedom. Syria has used torture against Lebanese prisoners, while their relatives have tried to inform the world of this dreadful practice.<sup>24</sup> The fact that Syrian security forces have routinely and wantonly arrested Lebanese nationals in Lebanon itself is stark proof of the unrestricted reality of Syrian occupation.

Syria spread a security net throughout the country causing Christians (and others) to live in fear of informers. Former members of the LF and Phalangists living in Lebanon refrain from speaking openly on the telephone. Rampant stealing and robbery in Beirut and elsewhere is reported to be the work of “Syrian gangs”, and this further instills fear in the hearts of all Lebanese, particularly the Christians. The judicial system, manipulated for Syrian purposes as intimated above, has lost any semblance of independent authority. The imprisonment of Samir Geagea is a case in point, no less the death sentences issued against hundreds of Christian leaders and activists. Abu Arz has been sentenced to death in absentia, as he fled to southern Lebanon to try and survive under the military umbrella of Israel’s “security zone”.

Syrian occupation became the prop for a regime without independent authority in Beirut. President Elias Hrawi, installed in 1989, and Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, in 1992, traveled to Damascus for instructions on each and every matter. The government, in rejecting Israel’s conditional offer from the spring of 1998 to withdraw from the south, was acting on orders from Syria.

Damascus conducts a decisive policy of thought-control and cultural strangulation. The celebrated free Lebanese press has been muzzled: journalists have been murdered, for example, Riyadh Taha, the President of the Lebanese Press Association; others were threatened with murder, like Pierre Atallah, while others have been kidnapped for a few days and then released. Information terrorism has included the removal of Pierre Daher as director of the Lebanese Broadcasting Company (LBC) and the appointment of a Syrian nominee in his place. Newspapers are gagged, like **al-Nahar** under the Khouri editors, and others like **al-Mawqaf** have been denied permission to publish at all. The violation of human rights by Syria and its Beirut regime is widespread and detailed. In mid-August 1998, the authorities prevented the well-known singer Hani El-Oumari from coming from Beirut to appear at the Ayn Ebel summer festival in southern Lebanon. The “official” explanation said that the festival at Ayn Ebel, a Christian village in the south, was sponsored by the Zionists to detract from a festival held in Shi’a Baalbek at the same time.

Syria’s economic interests in Lebanon indicate, unlike the excessive costs which usually accompany an extended military occupation, that concrete and variegated advantages accrue to this case of foreign occupation. Syrian-appointed Prime Minister Hariri himself, well

connected to Saudi interests, became a key economic actor in Lebanese business firms and land acquisition. The Biq'a valley drug trade is controlled, or at least supervised, by Syrian officers in tandem with Hizbullah. The employment for hundreds of thousands of Syrian workers in the Lebanese market reduces unemployment at home, while providing from \$1-3 billion annually in remittances. By contrast, the willingness of Syrians to accept menial jobs for a quarter of the salary that Lebanese would work for increases domestic Lebanese unemployment and impoverishment. Syrian army personnel stationed at check-points highhandedly and routinely impose a "Syrian tax" on Lebanese goods; cheap Syrian agricultural produce floods Lebanon; and Syrian companies are awarded government construction contracts in place of domestic Lebanese firms. In general, Syrian "rackets" control smuggling and local trade that humiliates and impoverishes broad strata of Lebanese society.<sup>25</sup>

Other Syrian considerations can be briefly identified. Its ethnic interests relate to settling and enfranchising thousands of Alawites, members of Assad's sectarian community, coming from the Latakia province into northern Lebanon. This development further exposes the porous character of Lebanese borders. Meanwhile, Syria's strategic calculations concern the option of a second military front, in addition to the Golan Heights, for warfare with Israel emanating from the southern ridges of the Biq'a toward Rashayya in southern Lebanon. At the tactical level, Syrian collaboration with Hizbullah consists of confronting Israel daily with small-scale warfare, without interruption since the mid-1980s, facing the Upper Galilee border area. Syria's choice in October 1998 to appoint General Emile Lahoud, army commander-in-chief, to serve as president of Lebanon was expectedly approved virtually unanimously by the Lebanese parliament. This choice could indicate long-range planning by Assad to employ the Lebanese army alongside that of Syria's against Israel or other future adversaries.

The realities of Syrian occupation of Lebanon in 1990 did not elicit global condemnation like that which confronted Iraqi conquest of Kuwait in 1990. Nor has Syrian control over Lebanon catalyzed a definable or credible Lebanese Christian resistance in the name of a national liberation struggle. Kashmiri opposition to Indian rule, the uprising in Kosovo against Serbia, no less the Irish struggle against British rule in Ulster, are but a few cases of native resistance to what is seen as foreign rule. Tacit Lebanese accommodation might seem to indicate that Syria's occupation is no occupation at all. Yet the severity and depth of the occupation by such a repressive regime like that of Assad in Damascus is reason enough to appreciate why it was, that the virtual dismantling of Lebanon as a free and markedly Christian state aroused little opposition and resistance.

Nonetheless, voices have been heard that confirm the incontrovertible fact, and certainly for the Maronite community, of Syria's unacceptable and illegitimate role in Lebanon. Exiled leader General Michel Aoun, in his name and that of the National Alliance for a Free Lebanon, has explained and complained that decisions affecting Lebanon are taken in Damascus. He referred regrettably to changes in the education curriculum and the economic infrastructure imposed by Syria.<sup>26</sup> Amin Gemayel, former President of Lebanon also exiled in France, stated the need to get the Syrian army out of the mountain and out of the city – Beirut. Despite his well-known and self-declared pro-Arab orientation, Gemayel argued for "coordination with Syria but not subordination". A rejuvenated Lebanon could re-surface with Syria's withdrawal from the country and with liberation, he continued, Lebanon would then work for reconciliation among the various groups. Dory Chamoun carried his anti-Syrian position a step further and stated that anyone who worked with the Lebanese government was a collaborator. Meanwhile, however, Lebanese leaders did little to obviate the presence of the Syrian army in Lebanon as permanent and final.<sup>27</sup>

On September 17, 1982, the United Nations Security Council passed Resolution 520 which took “note of Lebanon’s determination to ensure the withdrawal of all non-Lebanese forces from Lebanon”, while calling for “the strict respect for Lebanon’s sovereignty, territorial integrity, unity and political independence”. This position was articulated under the shadow of Israel’s military control of Beirut and the area southward to Israel’s northern border. Israel had invaded Lebanon in 1982 with the purpose of eliminating PLO terrorist activity emanating from Lebanon; while Syria had invaded Lebanon in 1976 and remained thereafter in control of Lebanese territory as part of its broader “Greater Syria” strategy according to which Lebanon has no right to separate independent existence. In 1985 in particular, Israel withdrew from all but a narrow “security zone” in southern Lebanon, yet Syria extended its military and political domination over 90 percent of Lebanese territory as an incremental process of expansion. On the face of it, Israel had partially fulfilled UN Resolution 520, but Syria violated it with impunity.

The national Maronite church of Lebanon conveyed, however moderately, its opinion concerning the illegitimacy of Syrian occupation of Lebanon. A church synod was held in Rome in late 1995 under the spiritual leadership of Pope John Paul II and it approved a document dealing with all aspects of spiritual and social life in the war-torn country. On political matters, the synod recognized that nothing was more demoralizing for the Lebanese people than the feeling that they are no longer in charge of their own destiny. This sentiment paralyzes national life and, moreover and no doubt concerning the Christian Lebanese, “prevents the return of emigrants, and continues to lead more people to leave for abroad”. The synod called for the liberation of territory from Israeli occupation, at the same time calling for “the departure from Lebanon of Syrian forces”. In conclusion the synod expressly stated that “all non-Lebanese armed forces leave the national territory” – consistent with United Nations resolution 520 – so that the Lebanese take full control of their country and work out the modes of living consistent with their historical and pluralistic character.<sup>28</sup>

Meanwhile, the Maronite Patriarch Nasrallah Sfeir, resident above Junieh at Bkerki, served as a focus of Christian spiritual and national integrity in response to Syrian domination of Lebanon. The efforts by Damascus to mollify the Patriarch and conciliate him virtually failed. Yet, the church did not seek to rally the community to protest or rebel against Syria’s penetration of Lebanese society and politics. The political decline of the Maronites did point to the residual and traditional centrality of the Patriarchate, as was the case in early centuries of Maronite history. Certainly the Patriarch as a symbol of steadfastness and independence was a fly in Syria’s political ointment. For he did after all refuse to travel to Damascus and moreover called for Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon.<sup>29</sup>

It is clear in broad historical terms that Syria’s unrestrained and persistent occupation of almost all of Lebanon has already and will further rupture the fabric of the Christian community. The Maronite dissolution in qualitative and quantitative indices is an immense collapse of the vigor and confidence of an ancient society. Lebanon is undergoing a process of de-Christianization and Arabization, by among other means the introduction of new schoolbooks that serve Syria’s goals for changing the identity and loyalty of the Christians in the country. If the demographic, religious, and political trends continue, this will further emasculate the Maronite community and turn the remnant in the homeland into more migrants, émigrés, and refugees fleeing to their Diaspora locales. “Greater Syria” will swallow Lebanon and it will be no more.

### 3. The Israeli Connection

A traditional inclination in Israeli foreign policy has been to cooperate with different non-Arab states and peoples thereby overcoming Israel's isolation in the Middle East region. This "peripheral policy", that sought relations with Turkey in the late 1950s and with Kurds in Iraq in the 1960s, served in its respective historical contexts as a reasonable policy bound to a strategic rationale. As a sole Jewish state under permanent siege from a hostile Arab-Muslim environment, Israel tried to cooperate and coordinate with those who shared converging interests against a common enemy. This Israeli policy also became known as a "minorities strategy" positioning the Jewish-majority state as the political centerpiece of this regional effort.<sup>30</sup>

The Jewish connection with the Lebanese has been notably the oldest and most intimate relationship of this kind. It begins against the biblical backdrop concerning King Solomon of Judea and King Hiram of Tyre and Sidon, surfaces with Moses Montifiore's moral interest in Christian safety in the face of slaughter in 1860, and assumes a particular political significance with an agreement signed by Yehoshua Hankin, Zionist land purchaser, and Maronite activists in 1920. In this accord, the Maronites recognized the Jewish right to build a national home in Palestine – the Land of Israel – while the Zionists recognized the right of a Christian Lebanon to exist separate from Muslim Syria.<sup>31</sup> Zionist ambitions, that sought the Litani river waters in southern Lebanon within the map of the Jewish homeland, were not seen as threatening to the Christian population's sense of Lebanon's territorial and national integrity.<sup>32</sup> When in the course of the War of Independence in 1948 the Israeli army penetrated southern Lebanon up to the Litani River, the local village inhabitants hoped that Israel would remain and incorporate the area into the new State of Israel.

Events in the 1930s evoked different dimensions of Jewish-Lebanese solidarity. Maronite Patriarch Antoine Butrus Arida expressed both support for Zionism in Palestine and sympathy for Jews targeted by Nazism and anti-Semitism in Germany.<sup>33</sup> The British Peel Commission Report of 1937, that recommended the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine, aroused the hope for a viable minorities' alliance in the Mideast. Ben-Gurion declared that "the Christian people of Lebanon face a destiny similar to that of the Jewish people," while Emile Edde on the Maronite side and Chaim Weizmann representing the Zionists met in Paris, raising a toast to Weizmann as the first president-to-be of the future Jewish state. Indeed he was with Israel's founding in May 1948.

The idea of a Zionist-Maronite alliance percolated through the political atmosphere during the fateful decade of the 1940s. Patriarch Arida and the poet Charles Corm were anxious about the 1943 National Pact's delicate Christian-Muslim balance and feared Christians' assimilating and dissolving into the Arab world, being particularly distraught by Lebanon's adherence to the Arab League in 1945. They sought to redress the ideological and political equation by cooperating with a Jewish Palestine. Aharon Amir, Israeli writer who was personally acquainted with Lebanon in that period, became cognizant of Maronite fears in the face of growing Muslim power: "the Sunday people" and "the Saturday people" shared one fate, his Christian interlocutors from southern Lebanon warned, and they best combine efforts to confront the common danger.<sup>34</sup> Yet Maronite Christian leaders, though conscious and supportive of shared interests with Zionism, usually refrained from publicly voicing their true views and thereby antagonizing both the Muslims of Lebanon and the Arabs of the Mideast.

Nonetheless, the Maronite Church did conclude an agreement, though secret, with the Jewish Agency in May 1946 which expectedly recognized reciprocally a Jewish Palestine and a Christian Lebanon. Archbishop Mubarak of Beirut subsequently advocated a Jewish state in

his public testimony in 1947 before the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine. But expressions of cooperation and mutual support ran aground in the political complexities of Lebanese machinations, aborting any effective political relationship between the Zionists and the Maronites.<sup>35</sup>

The notion of Israeli collaboration with the Christians of Lebanon reverberated over the years. Prime Minister Ben-Gurion made explicit reference to it immediately after Israel's establishment in 1948, as he hoped Israel's first treaty would be signed with Lebanon due to its Christian element. In 1954 he returned to the theme of politically transforming Lebanon into a singular Christian regime.<sup>36</sup> But the real opportunity to develop this Israeli policy arose in connection with the Palestinian-PLO presence and activity in Lebanon that threatened the Christian population, initially in southern Lebanon and later in Beirut and its environs. From the late 1960s until the mid-1970s, Christian Lebanon was on the defensive, brow-beaten by Muslim opposition and Palestinian terrorism. Then, Israel appeared on the scene providing military assistance both to the Phalangist (Gemayel) forces in central and northern Lebanon and to Major Haddad's forces in southern Lebanon, while opening the Good Fence at Metulla to offer civilian assistance to the distressed inhabitants across Israel's northern Galilee border. By 1976 an embryonic Israeli-Christian Lebanese alliance emerged to counter and contend with the Palestinian and Syrian adversaries. PLO terrorist attacks against Israeli civilian targets in Ma'alot, Kiryat Shmona, and Nahariya, were of a piece with PLO attacks against Christian targets, from Klaya and Marj'ayoun in southern Lebanon up to Beirut and northward through Lebanon. According to official thinking in Jerusalem, Syria constituted a strategic threat to a "free Lebanon and a safe Israel" at one and the same time.<sup>37</sup>

The apparent consolidation of an Israeli-Maronite alliance took place during 1981-82.<sup>38</sup> Prime Minister Menachem Begin committed himself and his government to protect the persecuted Christian minority and prevent their massacre, while Defense Minister Ariel Sharon became a prime catalyst in strengthening ties with Bashir Gemayel and his Lebanese Forces. The port of Jounieh north of Beirut served from the mid-1975s as the *entrepot* for arms delivered from Israel to the Phalangists. Determined to destroy the PLO infrastructure and thereby secure a safe Galilee, Israel planned a major military operation that would coordinate with Lebanese Christian participation against the Syrian forces. Begun in early June 1982, the Israeli invasion of Lebanon was militarily successful against both the Palestinians and the Syrians; but Christian cooperation, though agreed upon, was not forthcoming. The subsequent assassination of Bashir Gemayel in mid-September 1982, followed by the Christian (perhaps Syrian-orchestrated) massacre of hundreds of Palestinians in the Sabra and Shatilla refugee camps in Beirut, weakened Israel's political hand and stained her moral reputation. The end of the (initial phase of the) war did not indicate the elimination of Israel's military presence in Lebanon, just like the signing and subsequent abrogation of the May 17 Israeli-Lebanese agreement in 1983 did not inaugurate, much to Begin's disappointment, the normalization of relations between the two countries. The imbroglio in Lebanon slumped on, with attendant loss of soldiers' lives, turning the "War for the Peace of the Galilee" into a contentious domestic issue in Israel.

More specifically, while Lebanon unfortunately became a "dirty word", the Maronites-Phalangists acquired a bad name in Israel.<sup>39</sup> They seemed unreliable and deceitful, full of bravado perhaps more than bravery, playing Israel off with Syria in a callous manipulation of much Jewish good-will. Admittedly, Maronite hopes that Israel would chase Syrian forces completely from Lebanon proved groundless and disappointing too.<sup>40</sup> Bypassing the question of responsibility, the "Israeli phase" in modern Lebanese history was in the eyes of the Christian nationalists to reach its political peak in the immediate aftermath of the June 1982

invasion. Lebanon was to be liberated from Palestinians and Syrians by Israeli tanks, gunboats, and aircraft, while a new era of Jewish-Christian/Israeli-Lebanese friendship and peace would dawn on the “Land of the Cedars”.<sup>41</sup> But the Christian dream and the Israeli strategy floundered and failed.

The complex set of circumstances affecting the Israel-Lebanese morass contributed to incremental Israeli territorial pullbacks, from Beirut and then the Shouf Mountains, and down to the Litani river area. In 1985 Israel defined its “security zone” in southern Lebanon as a narrow strip of land north of the border, running from Nakura to Hasbaya, as a barrier to Shi’a or Palestinian attacks on Upper Galilee. The Israeli-Christian connection was limited to the Israel Defense Forces-Southern Lebanese Army coordination in the “security zone” in addition to Israeli civilian projects implemented by its Liaison Unit in the south.

The thrust of Israeli policy vis-a-vis Lebanon was clearly in the direction of withdrawal. This orientation was seemingly bolstered by UN Resolution 425 from 19 March 1978, which called for Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon after the “Litani Operation”. Yet Israeli forces did not withdraw soon thereafter, making resolution 425 both fulfilled and defunct. However Israel, and certainly Syria and the Beirut government, continued to see Resolution 425 as the operative international document that endorsed the demand for Israel’s withdrawal from all of Lebanon – even that part captured later in 1982.

Israel’s options in Lebanon still included the moral imperative of sparing the Christian population in the south from wholesale abandonment. While the SLA did not serve as a political vehicle to represent the views of the Lebanese, the remnant of the Lebanese Forces repeatedly reminded Israel that “South Lebanon Is Free Lebanon [not under Syrian occupation] and Israel’s Only True Ally In The Middle East”.<sup>42</sup> Through 1997-98 Sharbel Barakat, serving both as the SLA’s Director For Foreign Affairs and the World Lebanese Organization’s Middle East Director, warned of the imminent danger to the Christians of the south in the event of a complete Israeli withdrawal. Ethnic cleansing and massacre would be the Christians’ dire fate. Abu Arz expounded on the intrinsic connection between the Lebanese nation and the Jewish people as a regional factor against Arabism. Israel, he wrote, was always a nation friendly to Lebanon while Syria was a nation hostile to Lebanon.<sup>43</sup> Like Col. Barakat, Abu Arz proposed that Israel go beyond its moral obligation toward the Christians and support an autonomous southern Lebanon which could then enable the IDF to withdraw in stages.<sup>44</sup>

But Israel proposed neither its indefinite military presence nor its support for redefining the “security zone” as a free Lebanese entity in the south. Quite the opposite: the Netanyahu government declared its willingness in early 1998 to have the IDF leave southern Lebanon, thereby fulfilling [sic.] UN Resolution 425, and allow the national Lebanese army assume control over the area. Syria opposed this initiative, preferring to employ Hizbullah warfare against Israeli troops bogged down in the “security zone”, even though further or complete Israeli withdrawal will be seen as a victory for Syria and Muslim *jihad*. The profound Christian fear of an Israeli withdrawal became more intense in spring-summer 1998, for besides the stated Jerusalem policy, other political efforts led by Labor MK Yossi Beilin and a popular campaign by “The Four Mothers” also advocated the pullback position. While an imminent withdrawal did not seem likely, the public discussion of the possibility put into sharp focus the transparent fragility of the Israeli-Christian Lebanese connection. The military establishment did not favor a one-sided unilateral withdrawal, but nor did the political establishment consider the Christians, not those in the south nor those in the mountain in the north, nor yet the Lebanese Diaspora abroad, a full and credible partner with Israel. No one could deny Israel’s abiding troubles in Lebanon, but neither did Jerusalem consider the

Christian Maronites as its solution.<sup>45</sup> Israel lacked a resolute determination to pursue a “minority strategy” as a permanent component in its regional foreign policy; and the Christians of Lebanon, for their part, lacked the political integrity to appear worthy as Israel’s ally. For these reasons, and others, the Israeli connection did not surface as a long-term and comprehensive lever to realize Christian Maronite goals. The Christians would ostensibly be stuck facing militant Islam and hegemonic Syria, but with only a limited, temporary, and uncertain Israeli patron.

#### **4. The National Liberation Struggle**

The dramatic decline of the Christian community in Lebanon and the dangers lurking on its path can provide a revolutionary context for the emergence of a liberation struggle. Being desperate in failure and pushed to the corner can catalyze the Christians to grab the moment. For the struggle of thirteen-hundred years against Islam and the Arabs does not have to culminate in total collapse; rather, the memory of mythic Maronite history can inject the determination needed to prevent that long struggle from ending in national dissolution. With a still tenable presence within Lebanon, bolstered by economic, religious, and intellectual resources, the Christians can imagine the possibility of recovering their primary position again. Also important in the power equation is the Lebanese Christian Diaspora that numbers over five million, in France, Canada, America, Brazil, and Australia. The combination of frustration and abandonment on the one hand, and much talent, savvy, and potential on the other, could propel the Maronite Christians to launch a liberation struggle. Lebanon their homeland is under foreign occupation, and that provides the objective revolutionary crucible and dialectical equation for a repressed people to scale the moral and political highground in the name of a war for national freedom. With this background in mind, we first note three other alternatives available for the Christian community of Lebanon, and then the one of a national resistance struggle.

##### **Collaboration**

Christian politicians, like Foreign Minister Faris Buwayz and Interior Minister/Deputy Prime Minister Michel Murr, certainly Elie Hobeika, chose the path of open collaboration with the Syrian authorities who dominate all aspects of national life. This is a Lebanese version of Vichy under Syrian occupation.

##### **Adjustment**

This view takes account of the sorrowful sense of Christian defeat and loss coming out of the war from 1975-90, and calls upon the Maronites to cast off their insularity and haughtiness vis-a-vis the other confessional communities. Newspaper editor Emile Khoury advised that they get on with life and participate in society and politics. The Maronites still possess within Lebanon and abroad impressive resources; no less, Syrian occupation brought days of stability to the war-torn country.<sup>46</sup> Christian participation in the municipal elections in May-June 1998 is perhaps a sign of accommodation and adjustment to unpleasant realities. Dory Chamoun, head of the Liberal Party, chose to be elected to the mayoralty office in Deir al-Kamar.

## Opposition

A few major Maronite political figures constitute what is referred to as the National Alliance in opposition to Syrian control of Lebanon. Three of them are politically exiled in Paris: Michel Aoun, Amin Gemayel, and Raymond Edde. Along with Dory Chamoun, these personalities express their opposition to Syrian rule now while accepting ties with Syria later. They do not want to provoke Syria, which can hardly be intimidated by their seemingly benign rhetoric, and which in any case prefers they remain in political limbo rather than adopting a more radical position.<sup>47</sup> Dory Chamoun stated in a press interview that “we resist Israeli and Syrian occupation.” He added that the National Alliance opposes the Ta’if Agreement and Syrian control of the Beirut government, while he declared that the Syrian army should withdraw from Lebanon.<sup>48</sup> In June 1998, General Aoun visited the Lebanese *émigré* community of Australia and, in relating to the Israeli offer to withdraw from southern Lebanon, pointed out that “Lebanon, totally humiliated, rejected it due to Syrian pressure, which connected it with a retreat [by Israel] from the Golan Heights without consulting the Lebanese in the matter.” Aoun added that the West liberated Kuwait in 1991, but destroyed the independence of Lebanon by agreeing to Syrian occupation of the country.<sup>49</sup>

The status of these Christian figures and their public statements provide a political barometer of national sentiment that has not accepted Syria’s occupation of Lebanon. An incident in late 1997 illustrated the connection between the exiled leaders and their people at home, when hundreds of university students in Beirut demonstrated after the authorities in Lebanon prevented the broadcasting of an interview on MTV television with the popular exiled anti-Syrian leader Michel Aoun. Sixty-three protesters were detained and several people were wounded in confrontation with riot police. In late 1998, a report that Amin Gemayel was about to return to Lebanon evoked a ground-swell of enthusiasm among Kataeb and general ranks in Mount Lebanon, only to dissipate when the Beirut government decided to block the former president’s return. Overall, many years of Christian exile of national leaders, political activists, and Lebanese Forces fighters, in conjunction with the consolidation of Syrian domination, present a bleak image of the Lebanese opposition and its capacity to alter the situation (from abroad) in favor of a better Christian future in Lebanon.<sup>50</sup>

## Resistance

The concept of a Christian Lebanese resistance has been proposed by the World Lebanese Organization which was founded in September 1991. It called for a commitment “to resume the struggle for the liberation of Lebanon from Syrian occupation and Arab-Islamist domination, and the consecration of self-determination for the Christian people of Lebanon.”<sup>51</sup> In the spirit and tradition of the defenders of Lebanese Christian nationalism, the WLO headed by Dr. Walid Phares rejects any Arab identity to Lebanon, seeks a broad-based Christian coalition of Mideastern minorities, promotes cooperation with Jewish organizations, and proposes an alliance with Israel as an ideological and strategic choice.

Most specifically, Dr. Phares promoted the idea that southern Lebanon be transformed into a political entity as a base area for a fully Free Lebanon. The Beirut government is not an authentic representative of the wishes of the Lebanese people, certainly its Christian Maronite component. At the same time, however, the SLA forces in the south under General Antoine Lahad constitute a military unit, but not a political vehicle for representing the will even of the southern Lebanese. Therefore, it becomes necessary to fill the political vacuum by establishing a national Lebanese authority in the area Israel calls the “security zone”, which is the only part of Lebanon free of Syrian occupation. So “pending the liberation of the entire



country”, Phares wrote, a national liberation movement in the south, endowed with popular legitimacy through free elections, would initially complement the SLA as the latter ultimately replaces the IDF on the road from Marj’ayoun and Jezzine, to Beirut, Jounieh, and Batroun.<sup>52</sup> The many years of Christian resistance to Syrian occupation failed with the collapse of Christian political dominance in Lebanon and the loss of Lebanese independence to Syria, ultimately in 1991. But the renewal of the struggle is presented as an immediate political imperative.

The core of a renewed resistance would be inspired and organized by a new Lebanese team that would try to unite the politically fragmented community and revitalize the Christian alliance with Israel. Efforts are being invested in coordinating the resistance with prominent personalities like Aoun and Gemayel. Dr. Walid Phares, Abu Arz the leader of the Guardians of the Cedars, and Colonel Sharbel Barakat, former deputy commander of the Southern Lebanese Army, constitute senior figures trying to rekindle the flame of military and political resistance in the south. They argue that the Christian Lebanese and Israel share a common struggle against Arab-Islamic forces in the region, this despite Christian betrayal and Israeli disappointment in the course of events in June 1982. It seems reasonable to posit that Israel’s national interest would be better served by a large and friendly Christian population north of the Galilee frontier rather than a fundamentalist Islamic Hizbullah presence. A free government in the south, enjoying an infrastructure of water resources, a port and airfield, with potential for economic and social development, would liberate Lebanese energies dampened by exile, suffocating under Syrian occupation, and in abeyance due to Israeli policies.<sup>53</sup> With a new patriotic spirit and an activist military doctrine, a revamped SLA would define its goal as the liberation of Lebanon. A “phased Lebanization” plan proposes to invigorate the flagging spirits of the Christian population at home and abroad, while offering Israel – bogged down and bleeding badly in the south – a way to carry out an incremental and, in time, a full withdrawal, but without exposing itself to Shi’a and Syrian dangers.<sup>54</sup>

The WLO convened a major three-day “Seminar on Lebanon” in Washington in late June, 1998 to further articulate, organize, and mobilize efforts for a new Lebanese national resistance movement. The meeting brought together Lebanese *émigrés* and members of the Lebanese Forces from the United States, Canada, France, and Lebanon itself. The core discussion focused on UN Resolution 520, whose call for withdrawal of foreign forces from Lebanon serves as a legitimizing international denunciation of Syria’s occupation forces that continue to dominate Lebanon. The WLO conceived of a political campaign that would include the opening of an office in Washington for the purpose of lobbying Congress, and an effort to promote Diaspora financial funding and public relations activities on behalf of a Free Lebanon. Two central components of the new strategy concern soliciting the United Nations and its various bodies on behalf of Lebanese grievances and rights, and consolidating the Christian-Jewish coalition as a broad-based campaign in the face of rising Muslim influence in various public and political arenas. Prior to and during the seminar, newspaper articles and political advertisements appeared setting forth some of these pertinent ideas and goals of the resistance movement.<sup>55</sup> Both a sense of urgency and a feeling of rejuvenation characterized the deliberations.<sup>56</sup>

This dual sensation became politically concretized a few days later when an official visit by Syrian President Hafez al-Assad to Paris in mid-July was met by two Lebanese demonstrations in the French capital. At the same time, a Lebanese committee distributed a concise and compelling **Black Book on Syria in Lebanon** which detailed the history of Syrian military occupation since 1976 and the violence carried out against the Christians of

Lebanon.<sup>57</sup> The question of Lebanese political prisoners in Syrian jails is a central aspect of the resistance information campaign.

Some signs of Lebanese Christian vitality and rebelliousness emerged in 1997-98 in Lebanon and in the Diaspora.<sup>58</sup> This turn of events may signal that, despite the sorry record of the decade of the 1990's, Lebanese Christian nationalism is yet more rooted and authentic, capable of renewal abroad that would send a message of hope and support beaming to the homeland. Meanwhile, the activities of the Lebanese resistance both at home and abroad have aroused the intelligence services in Beirut, working under strict Syrian control, to engage in efforts to uncover the activists' work and plans. In this regard, Syrian agents will follow the resistance to France and America, and will try to penetrate its ranks there.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Lebanon today is passing through a transitional stage with the push-and-pull of forces affecting its contemporary fate. The first two models for Lebanon that we considered – the Islamic and Syrian ones – constitute a massive defeat for both a Christian Lebanon and, by consequence, for a secure Israel in the rapidly changing political and geo-strategic contours of the Mideast. Certainly the tenacity of the Muslim and Syrian forces contrast favorably with the gloom of Christian deterioration and the self-questioning Israeli position on Lebanon.

The latter two models – the Israeli connection and Christian resistance – have suffered a blow since September 1982. Nonetheless, Israel demonstrated a determination in maintaining the “security zone” and, as summarized, there are signs of Christian revival. The possibility of “Lebanonization” in southern Lebanon, by promoting a more autonomous native Lebanese political entity and a “Free Lebanese Army”, recalls America’s “Vietnamization” policy in South Vietnam: that is, to strengthen the local population to defend itself, while reducing the military role of the foreign ally.<sup>59</sup> Israeli policy has avoided any precipitate withdrawal from Lebanon, specifically southern Lebanon, and this has served to protect the Christian population in the south. But no Israeli government adopted as a complementary policy the cultivation of “Lebanonization” or promoted a Lebanese liberation struggle. American support for the Contras and Afghani wars of liberation in the 1980s, or for the Iraqi anti-Saddam Hussein opposition in the 1990s, are examples of policies that Israel might consider in evaluating the viability of supporting a Lebanese liberation struggle. Israel may be supporting, as reported in July 1998, an anti-Syrian underground Christian network in Lebanon.<sup>60</sup> But this is hardly comparable with a bold strategic plan – more political than military in design – to promote Christian autonomy and Lebanese independence no less in peace and friendship with Jewish Israel.

Syria’s military strategy of domination and penetration, controlling foreign and security policy, and acting as “the arbiter of power in Lebanon”, has been manifestly successful.<sup>61</sup> Notwithstanding, Syria is in a very vulnerable political position. Its occupation of Lebanon and attendant policies are a galling political fact, though yet spared international censure. It is perhaps inevitable that sooner or later someone will unmask the rape of Lebanon. A concerted political campaign against Syria would put Damascus on the defensive, while a military campaign would engage her in a fight whose results cannot easily be foreseen. The Assad regime itself in Syria cannot be considered other than a precarious dictatorship led by an aging and ailing president, who heads a despised heterodox ‘Alawi minority religious community that the majority Sunnis will seek to wreak their vengeance upon. The political order may be threatened by instability and coups once Assad is gone, though he tries to prepare his son Beshaar for a smooth succession in power; while the economy of Syria, long

neglected and having failed to overcome its inherent sluggishness and poor performance, provides fertile ground for popular discontent against the regime. The strategic situation is no less problematic across Syrian borders facing the combined forces of Turkey to the north and Israel to the south-west. Taken together, there are signs that the political aftermath of Hafez al-Assad's demise will create an opportunity for the Maronite Christians of Lebanon ■

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“Lebanonize Lebanese Muslims and to Arabize Lebanon’s Christians.” In the pact Christians were supposed to renounce alignment with the West (mainly France), while Muslims were to forgo any notion of integrating Lebanon into the legacy in Lebanon, Christians were then subjected to the frightening imagery of the decline and exile of the Syrian and Iraqi Christian communities.<sup>24</sup> Here again the paradox was striking. More than a century earlier, Arab, par 35 The notion of Israeli collaboration with the Christians of Lebanon reverberated over the years. Prime Minister Ben-Gurion made explicit reference to it immediately after Israel's establishment in 1948, as he hoped Israel's first treaty would be signed with Lebanon due to its Christian element. Reference: Christian Decline and Models of Lebanon. Desperate diplomacy: The Zionist-Maronite Treaty of 1946. Citing article. Sep 1992. Lebanese actors without provoking civil conflict among Lebanese sectarian political forces has remained a key challenge for U.S. policymakers. This report provides an overview of Lebanon and current issues of U.S. interest. It provides background information, analyzes recent developments and key policy debates, and tracks legislation, U.S. assistance, and recent congressional action. Congressional Research Service.