



A Game of Masters and Proxies

Patrick Seale

In this summer of 1989, the Lebanese have touched new depths of despair about the future of their fragmented and war-torn country. They fear that the international community and the Arab world have both diagnosed the Lebanese disaster as incurable. Certainly neither superpower, nor Europe, nor the Arab League appears able to resolve the crisis — and there is even a certain reluctance to try, perhaps because so many external actors have already burnt their fingers in Lebanon. The emergency Arab summit convened at Casablanca in May 1989 brought the Lebanese no relief, nor can they realistically expect much from the Higher Committee of King Fahd, King Hassan and President Chadli Benjadid, appointed by the summit to attempt to nurse the patient back to health. Most difficult of all for the Lebanese to bear is the knowledge that their sufferings, even last spring's ferocious bombardments, have not held the world's attention, but have been overshadowed by other dramatic events in the region such as the Palestinian struggle for statehood and the uncertainties of post-Khomeini Iran.

The Lebanese are often accused of responsibility for the suicide of their country. They are repeatedly exhorted by outsiders to overcome their destructive feuds and put Lebanon together again. This is less fair. The Lebanese crisis is no longer a local one, if it ever was, and local actors and institutions are powerless to resolve it on their own. For one thing, what is left of the old Lebanese order has been battered by the civil war to the point of uselessness. The presidency, the Chamber of Deputies, the characteristic political bargaining between

notables each supporting a network of clients, the distribution of public service posts on a confessional basis, the cement provided by cross-confessional alliances of merchants—all these may still be latent in Lebanese society, but none remains in its old effective form. No president could be elected in 1988, the Chamber has not met for years, the notables have been assassinated or died of old age or chosen exile, the army has split and the bourgeoisie has fled.

Meanwhile new forces born of the civil war have emerged, but they are centrifugal and confrontational where the old order provided a measure of cohesion based on compromise. The Lebanese state may have been weak but it worked. Now the state has been supplanted by an array of political, military and religious bosses, each exercising only local power, often in a single locality, city or even tangle of streets. Such men as Walid Junblat, Nabih Berri, Samir Ja'ja, or Muhammed Hussein Fadlallah, to mention only the more prominent, seem to defend the narrow parochial interest as a whole. But whether it be the old order or the new disorder, the future of Lebanon is no longer in Lebanese hands.

The essential problem of Lebanon is not the failure of the Lebanese to live together, but rather that their divisions have been exploited and magnified by external forces. Lebanon is a battlefield for other people's wars, of which the most enduring are those between Syria and Israel and Syria and Iraq. This external competition over Lebanon is the most important single factor in the dismemberment of the country. Most Lebanese communities have become the instruments of external powers. But such internal-external connections create obstacles to internal reconciliation as each Lebanese community waits for a shift in the regional balance of power in favour of its patron which will improve its own bargaining position on the Lebanese scene. Too hasty a signature might prove a lost opportunity. No doubt when Bashir Gemayyel allied himself with Israel in 1976-1982, or Michel Aoun took support from Iraq in 1988-1989, they did so primarily to benefit their cause. But in most instances the locals end up serving their patron's purposes more surely than their own.

Pressure on Syria

Of all the external actors, Syria is the most prominent and the one which most ferociously defends its claim to be in Lebanon. What is new about the situation in the summer of 1989 is that Syria has come under unprecedented pressure to end the military presence it has maintained in Lebanon since it intervened in the civil war in 1976.

On the ground, the immediate challenge comes from General Michel Aoun, former commander of the Lebanese army and now boss of the Maronite Christian enclave, who has openly and repeatedly called for the expulsion of the Syrians as the only road to national renaissance. Aoun has gone further still: he has called for the overthrow of Syria's leader, President Hafiz al-Asad. His defiance has been given teeth by Iraqi backing. Iraq has provided Aoun with funds and weapons, including, it has been rumoured, long-range missiles able to hit Damascus. The Aoun-Iraqi challenge must now be added to the threat in Lebanon which Syria has long had to face from Israel. In fact, for the moment, Iraq has supplanted Israel as Syria's immediate enemy.

What makes this particular battle for Lebanon so crucial for Asad is that he is already fighting rearguard actions on other fronts. The PLO leader Yasser Arafat has thrown off Syrian control to pursue a dynamic peace policy of his own. King Hussein of Jordan has escaped from Syria's orbit by joining Iraq, Egypt and North Yemen in the new Arab Cooperation Council. Asad's ally, Iran, was humbled by being compelled to call a halt to the war with Iraq, and this in turn has eroded Syria's immediate position, especially in the Gulf. It is, of course, Asad's backing for Iran in the Gulf war that is driving the Iraqi leader, President Saddam Hussein, to seek revenge against Syria in Lebanon.

But beyond the loss of regional influence, Syria is suffering a loss of credibility. After fourteen years of effort, few Lebanese and few outsiders still believe it is able to bring about a solution to Lebanon's ills. At the Casablanca summit, Asad faced major criticisms over Lebanon from Arab leaders and managed to escape outright censure only by making reluctant concessions on other issues such as Egypt's readmission to the Arab League and Arafat's peace diplomacy. Although the Syrian media have claimed that Casablanca was a triumph for Syrian diplomacy, Asad in fact won no more than a reprieve. He must now subdue Aoun and reassert his authority, or face more concerted Arab pressure in the future.

The security argument

Why does Syria not disengage from a country which has brought it so many problems? Two reasons outweigh all the others: the first is security, the second, the regional projection of Syrian power. Lebanon is both Syria's vulnerable flank and a springboard for its influence in the rest of the Middle East.

Of these two reasons, security is the most basic, the one on which there can be no compromise. In the words of a leading French expert on Lebanon, the security argument is self-evident: one need only look at a map.¹ An Israeli thrust into Lebanon up the Beqaa Valley would outflank Damascus and risk cutting Syria in two, threatening the central cities of Homs and Hama.

Syrian spokesmen often say, with some justice, that the security of Syria and the security of Lebanon are indivisible. Were Lebanon to fall into hostile hands, Syria would face an intolerable threat. Indeed, a constant of Syrian policy is to prevent Lebanon becoming a base for operations against it—especially by Israel. The fear of an Israeli attack is not an idle one. In 1976, Asad had to make war on his allies of the time, the Palestinians and the Lebanese left, in order to ward off the threat of an Israeli intervention in favour of the Christians which would have gravely undermined his security. In 1978 and in 1982, Israel twice invaded Lebanon, destroying on the latter occasion Syria's air defences in the Beqaa, downing ninety Syrian planes, storming Syrian fortifications, cutting the vital Damascus-Beirut highway and besieging Syrian forces in Beirut (as well, of course, as Yasser Arafat's PLO). On that occasion, Israel very nearly managed to bring Lebanon into its orbit by expelling Syria altogether. To escape from this near-fatal danger, Asad mobilised his allies and proxies and, in a guerilla war, managed to drive Israel's forces back to the border area. At the same time, to give himself a measure of deterrence against a further Israeli attack, he expensively upgraded his armoury with Soviet-supplied air defences and other weapons.

In the public mind, Israel's invasions of Lebanon are associated with the names of Menachem Begin, who came to power in Israel in 1977, and with that of his pugnacious defence minister, Ariel Sharon, who masterminded the 1982 war. But in fact the Zionist interest in Lebanon dates from the 1920s.² In planning for their own state, Zionist strategists had their eye on the waters of Lebanon's Litani river and were dissatisfied with the Galilee frontiers agreed by Britain and France, the mandatory powers in Palestine and Lebanon. Closer to our own day, Israel's expulsion of Palestinians in 1948 and 1967, its incitement of hatred between Palestinian and Lebanese by repeated air raids on Lebanon from the 1960s onwards, its destruction of the Middle East Airlines fleet in 1968, its killing of Palestinian leaders in central Beirut in 1973, and its almost continuous harassment of Lebanon for giving a home to the Palestinian resistance from 1970 onwards—all these greatly contributed to the destruction of Lebanon's society and political system. Syria could not but feel under

constant threat from the violence across the border. Weaker than Israel, it was unable to take up the military challenge. To this day, Israel retains the power to reactivate the Lebanese "sideshow" whenever it sees an advantage in embarrassing or threatening Asad. The fear in Damascus is that Israel may choose to reignite the flames in Lebanon in order to distract the world's attention from its repression of the Palestinian *intifada*.

In addition to the Israeli threat, the long mountain frontier between Syria and Lebanon is permeable to smugglers, saboteurs, spies and trouble-makers of all sorts, and difficult if not impossible to seal. In consequence, Syrian governments since the Second World War have tried to make sure of a say in the composition of Lebanese governments, and especially in the choice of presidents as well as of intelligence and security chiefs. Today, of course, the Syrian authorities are present on both sides of the border, perhaps the only way it can be adequately protected.

Apart from defending himself against Israel, Asad has also been concerned to promote Syria as a regional player of the same rank as Egypt or Iraq. Circumstances favoured this ambition. Egypt's absence from the Arab scene for a decade after the 1978 Camp David accords and Iraq's absorption for much of the same time in its struggle with Iran gave Asad the opportunity to affirm Syria's dominance in the Arab heartlands. Control of Lebanon was an essential ingredient as was an extension of Syria's writ over Jordan and the Palestinians. But the extension of Syrian power aroused resentment. Groups most immediately in Syria's shadow (the Lebanese, Jordanians and Palestinians) sought to regain their freedom of action, while more distant powers—Egypt, Iraq and Saudi Arabia—worked to curtail Syrian power in order to protect their own. Thus there is a disturbing duality in Arab politics. The Arabs want Syria to be strong enough to confront Israel, but not so strong

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as to dominate them. In much the same way, the states of the Arabian Peninsula want Iraq to be strong enough to confront Iran—and indeed gave it the financial resources to do so throughout the Gulf War—but not so strong as to lord it over them.

One people, two states

Syria's presence in Lebanon stems, therefore, from essential national interests, of which national security is the bed-rock. But on further analysis, other concerns may be examined which explain Syrian involvement in Lebanon. Together they make up a rich and complex web of relations, which cannot easily be disentangled, and certainly not by General Aoun's bluster or by the fiat of an Arab summit. Five strands in the web may be identified.

A constant of the political discourse of the Syrian Ba'th state is Arab nationalism. Thus Asad argues that the essential unity of the Arab nation makes Syria's presence in Lebanon legitimate, while that of Israel is alien and illegitimate.³ Syrian spokesmen never tire of telling the world that Syria's aim is to preserve Lebanon's "Arab identity", to ensure that its "nationalist" forces are not defeated while the "Zionists" and "isolationists" are held at bay. By protecting Lebanon, it is argued, Syria is doing no more than its pan-Arab duty.

However, a second strand in Syrian thinking, one less willingly avowed, suggests that protecting Lebanon is not so much a pan-Arab as a pan-Syrian duty. This is the argument of the Syrian Socialist Party, heirs of Antun Sa'ada's Parti Populaire Syrien of the 1930s and 1940s, which preached the essential unity of a "natural" or "Greater" Syria, with a destiny separate from that of the rest of the Arab world. Although President Asad is by conviction and political background an Arab nationalist, there seems little doubt that advocates of Greater Syria are to be found in his regime.

Although they were once bitter enemies, the Arab nationalist Ba'th party and the pan-Syrian SSNP appear to have effected a tacit reconciliation. Certainly, when Syria marched into Lebanon in 1976, the SSNP was jubilant. It considered that Syria had fulfilled its pan-Syrian role by erasing the hated Sykes-Picot frontiers, "drawn by imperialism on the Arab map".⁴

Underpinning both the pan-Syrian rationale for Syria's presence in Lebanon is a third trend—that which stresses the historical, geographical and sociological

bonds uniting Syria and Lebanon. We are reminded that much of what is Lebanon today thought of itself as Syrian until the creation of Greater Lebanon by the French in 1920. Neither country has a neighbour closer, in every sense of the word, than the other. In Asad's formulation, Syria and Lebanon are "one people but two states". Thus he acknowledges Lebanon's separate statehood, while claiming for Syria a "special relationship" on the grounds of kinship, common culture and contiguity.

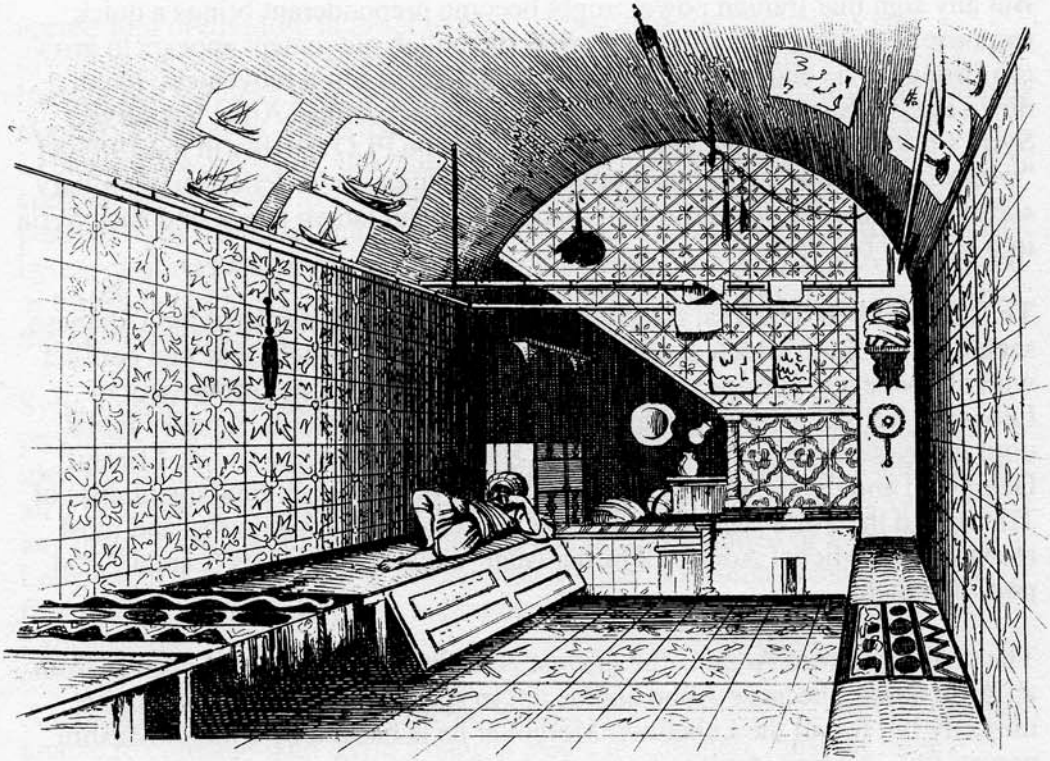
A fourth variation on Syro-Lebanese ties is the reality of what is actually taking place on the ground, what may be termed the functional argument. For all practical purposes, the frontier between the two countries no longer exists; the Beqaa and Tripoli are as much under Asad's rule as is Syria itself; the economies of the two countries have been integrated, even if largely on black market rules. Years of Syrian presence in Lebanon have "created facts" which will not easily be reversed.

Finally, there is what is invoked as the legal justification for Syria's presence. As Syrian officials say: "We were invited in by the properly constituted authority in Beirut, and if it asks us to go, we will". In the meantime...

All these arguments and ideologies—the need for security, the appeal to Arab nationalism or to pan-Syrianism, the ties of history, geography and kinship, the baser motives of interlocking commercial interests not excluding contraband traffic, as well as the legitimacy of an official Lebanese invitation endorsed at the time by the Arab League—make up the complex rationale for the Syrian presence in Lebanon. Sometimes one argument is given prominence, sometimes another, but the truth is that all contribute to Syria's presence, and together explain why it cannot easily disengage.

Taking up the challenge

Indeed, so important has Lebanon become for Syria that President Asad feels he must take up every challenge to his position there, whether from Israel or from other powers. Clearly, his dearest wish is to see a total Israeli withdrawal and the severance of the links between them and the Maronites which flourished after 1976. But failing this desired outcome, Asad must accommodate himself to hostile coexistence with Israel in Lebanon—a coexistence characterised by unwritten "red lines", mutual poaching of each other's assets, and constant wary surveillance.



Barber's Shop.

But Israel is not Syria's only challenger. The United States and France, were chased out of Lebanon in 1983 because they were seen by Damascus as threats to Syria's influence. The blowing up on October 23, 1983, of the US marine barracks and of a French army camp by Shi'a militants allied to Syria were stern warnings to these powers to keep out. (Britain and Italy also contributed troops to the multi-national force in Lebanon but they were not regarded by Syria as politically threatening and were able to withdraw without casualties.)

Even Syria's ally, Iran, is sometimes seen as a possible competitor over whom Syria must exercise vigilance. Syria helped Iran to acquire influence among the Shi'a population of Lebanon and enabled Iranian Revolutionary Guards to transit through Syria on their way to the Shi'a stronghold of the Beqaa Valley.

But any sign that Iranian power might become preponderant brings a quick response. Whenever the Iranian-backed Hezbollah movement appears to grow too strong, Syria encourages Amal, the mainstream Shi'a movement, to cut it down to size. Similarly, on a number of bloody occasions, Amal has served Syria's purposes in defusing a challenge from the PLO notably in the 1985-87 "wars of the camps". Asad cannot tolerate a resurgence of Palestinian military action in southern Lebanon which might trigger an Israeli attack and suck Syria into another conflict.

Thus, from 1976 onwards, Asad has felt the need to be master of the Lebanese scene, an ambition which at one time or another has brought him into conflict with almost every Lebanese community—with the National Movement of Lebanese leftists and Palestinians led by the Druze chieftain, Kamal Junblat until his assassination in 1977, with the Maronites under the ill-fated Bashir Gemayyel and then under his brother Amin, with the Sunni fundamentalists of Tripoli and the Shi'a fundamentalists of Beirut's southern suburbs, and most recently with Michel Aoun's "Marounistan" enclave around its "capital", the port of Junieh.

The challenge from Aoun is the gravest Asad has had to face in Lebanon from an Arab quarter because Aoun claims not to speak simply for the Maronite minority but for all the Lebanese. Moreover he is backed by a major Muslim power, Iraq. Adding insult to injury, he totally rejects Syria's claim to a "special relationship" and in fact suggests that Syria is a greater threat to Lebanon's independence and survival than Israel itself. Little wonder, therefore, that Asad's struggle with Aoun is likely to be a war to the death.

Asad's ambiguity

It is striking that in spite of long years of direct Syrian involvement, the Lebanese are still confused about the reasons for Syria's presence in their country and are uncertain about its ultimate intentions. A question frequently posed in Lebanese circles is "What does Asad want?"

Theories abound. Some Lebanese believe he wants to annex Lebanon, or at least those parts of it, once considered Syrian, which surround the former *mutasarrifiyya* of Mount Lebanon conceded by the Ottomans as a haven for the Maronites. Others believe his ambitions are limited to drawing Lebanon into his sphere of influence. Some hold that he wants a united Lebanon, others

accuse him of dividing in order to rule, of exacerbating suspicions and divisions between the communities, of playing minority politics because he himself is a minority man, a member of Syria's Alawi community. His enemies even go so far as to allege that he had a tacit accord with Israel to divide Lebanon between them, and that his hold over the Beqaa is a form of compensation for the loss of the Golan. This confusion about Syria's aims is perhaps to be expected among a Lebanese population profoundly traumatised by the civil war and apprehensive about the future. But it must also be counted as testimony of Syria's own perplexity as it has struggled over the years with the Lebanese puzzle.

Syria's preferred objectives in Lebanon are very probably the ones it proclaims: namely to bring about a united, independent Lebanon, of Arab identity, shielded from alien Israeli designs and friendly to Syria—and above all a Lebanon which does not lend itself to hostile schemes against Syria from any quarter. On the matter of whether Syria prefers a united or a divided Lebanon, it would seem self-evident that a united Lebanon is more likely to find itself in Syria's orbit than a disunited one, such is the density of Syro-Lebanese ties.

A united Lebanon must therefore be Syria's clear preference. Israel, in contrast, unable to compete with Syria's natural assets in Lebanon, must prefer a fragmented country offering it greater opportunities to manoeuvre for influence with one or other community, as it has attempted to do with the Druzes, the Shi'as and of course, with the Maronites. Rather than setting one community against the other, Syria's record suggests that it has generally tried to hold the ring so as to prevent any one community of them from becoming dominant, and thus keep alive the hope of inter-community coexistence which is the essence of the Lebanese system.

Syria has repeatedly encouraged the Lebanese to reform their constitutional system to take account of the social and demographic changes of recent decades. Greater parliamentary representation for the Muslims, now a clear majority in the country, has been urged as a way to heal the wounds in Lebanese society. The evidence suggests that Asad believes Lebanon cannot be governed without the participation of the Shi'a community, the largest in the country and hitherto the least favoured. But, in pressing Shi'a claims, he has not sought to do away with guarantees for the Christians, expressed in the Maronites' tenure of the presidency, nor with the Sunnis' traditional tenure of



the prime minister's office, nor fundamentally to recast Lebanon's confessional political and administrative structures. Syria's constant policy has been to reform the system, not overturn it. This was the philosophy behind its encouragement both for President Franjiyya's Constitutional Document of 1976 and for President Sarkis's 14-point Programme of May 1980, behind Syria's sponsorship of the Geneva and Lausanne conferences of Lebanese notables in November 1983 and March 1984 and its brokerage of the Tripartite Agreement of December 1985 which brought together Nabih Berri's (Shi'a) Amal, Walid Junblat's (Druze) Progressive Socialist Party and Elie Hobeika's (Maronite) Lebanese Forces.

None of these attempts came to fruition, but it was not for want of Syrian effort. Each time local die-hards or Syria's external enemies managed to block the path of reform.

Reckoning with Syrian claims

No doubt Syria made mistakes in Lebanon over the years. Its army was not always an effective peace-keeping instrument. Some officers could not resist the temptations of enrichment from smuggling. Some Syrian envoys and generals proved irritatingly overbearing, and after so long a presence, it was not surprising that resentment against the Syrian forces should have accumulated. Damascus also made errors of political judgement. The Tripartite Agreement, for example, struck by Syria between Lebanese warlords, quickly collapsed. A putsch inside the Maronite camp, carried out with Israeli and American encouragement, enabled Samir Ja'ja to oust Elie Hobeika from control of the Lebanese Forces—and so defeat Syria's design. It was also a mistake for Syria to seek American backing in imposing its candidate—the relatively unknown Michel Dahir—for the Lebanese presidency in September 1988. Dahir proved unacceptable, the election did not take place, Lebanon without a president was split between rival Muslim and Christian prime ministers, Salim al-Huss and Michel Aoun, providing further opportunities for external intervention, notably from Iraq.

Damascus made another mistake in not composing with General Aoun once his army had tamed Ja'ja's Lebanese Forces last February. Aoun sent word to Damascus of his readiness to cooperate, but he was cold-shouldered, Damascus preferring to deal with men wholly committed to it. Iraq, which had already identified Aoun as a potential instrument to use against Syria, now rushed to

support him. The result was the open and violent breach between Asad and Aoun which still casts fear over Lebanon in this summer of 1989. A defter Syrian hand might have defused the crisis before it escalated.

Meanwhile, Aoun has been able to capitalise on the confusions and fears of the Lebanese and on the widespread weariness with the Syrian presence. He holds out the hope that Lebanon's salvation could lie in entrusting its destiny to a military saviour such as himself, a message his countrymen have grasped in nicknaming him "NapoleAoun". But in spite of his undoubted appeal, Aoun's chances of success must be considered minimal. In political terms, he is a dreamer, Don Quixote rather than Napoleon, whose aim of expelling Syria from Lebanon clashes head-on with Asad's security doctrine and regional ambitions. Whatever Arab and international criticisms he faces, on the ground in Lebanon Asad remains overwhelmingly strong with his troops besieging Aoun's enclave on all sides.

The lesson of the past decade and a half is that the solution of the Lebanese crisis does not exist in a vacuum, nor can it be detached from its regional context. Whatever the disputes between Lebanese factions, the crisis is essentially a function both of the Arab-Israeli conflict and of the inter-Arab "cold war". It cannot be uncoupled from these disputes. The record suggests that there will be no peace for Lebanon until a comprehensive settlement is reached between Arabs and Israelis and—perhaps a still more distant goal—until there is a general improvement in the Arab climate, and in particular peace between Damascus and Baghdad. This is not a conclusion which brings the Lebanese much comfort.

Finally one may say that whatever relationship eventually evolves between Syria and Lebanon, it must take Syria's legitimate security interests into account. Such is the geopolitical reality which cannot be ignored.

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- 3 - Speech by President Asad on July 20, 1976, *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts*, July 22-23, 1976.
- 4 - Interview with the SSNP leader, In'am Ra'd, Damascus, August 1984.