Lebanon: Theatre of Arms Twisting

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The Middle East or the Arab-Islamic Region (AIR) is a center of serious tension that has erupted into several wars, and is expected to erupt into more. Palestine is the major source of this tension, but the theaters of arms twisting between the different concerned powers keeps moving from one place to another. Nowadays, Lebanon is the center.

Lebanon is an Arab country that became to be recognized as a political entity in 1922 when the League of nations ratified the partition of Syria into four political entities: Smaller Syria of today, Jordan, Palestine and Lebanon. It is a small country with 10,450 sq2, and around 4,5 million people. It is famous for its touristic sites, and its intelligent hard working people. However, the population is heterogynous sect-wise. There are Moslems who are divided into Sunnis, Shiites and Druze; and there Maronite, Orthodox and Catholic Christians. In its political system, the president of the country should be a Maronite, the prime minister a Moslem Sunni, and the speaker of the House a Moslem Shiite.

In the old days when the Americans were trying to create military and political alliances to face the Soviets, the Lebanese used to be divided on sectarian bases; and mostly, Christians used to side with America, while Moslems used to side with the pan-Arab trends. Nowadays, the Lebanese are divided politically and making two main inter-sectarian coalitions: one named the forces of March/14 and keeping good ties with the US, the other is the opposition led by Hizballah, and keeping close ties with Syria.

The Lebanese have been differing on the question of Syrian presence in Lebanon. The Syrian army had been their in Lebanon for around thirty years under the pretext of preserving peace in Lebanon and keeping the warring Lebanese factions under control. Lebanon suffered from a civil war that started in 1975 and ended in 1990. The Syrian intervention was approved by the Arab league, but could not provide stability until 1990 when the US made a deal that allowed Syria to have control over Lebanon in return of Syrian participation in the War against Saddam Hussein in Kuwait.

So many Lebanese accused Syria of dictatorship and exploitation of the country, and started mobilizing the public opinion so as to drive the Syrian army out of the country. Rafeeq Al-Hareeri, the ex-prime minister was thought to be dissatisfied with the Syrian presence. Al-Hareeri was assassinated on Feb 14, 2004.

Syria was accused of the assassination, and the US immediately called the UN Security Council to act against Syria. The Syrian army withdrew from Lebanon, and the Lebanese started their acute internal squabble. The Lebanese became divided on political terms rather than sectarian. Some thought that the Syrian presence was necessary to prevent internal feuds, while others thought that the Syrian absence allows for democracy to prevail. Lebanese legislative elections where held and a prime minister chosen (elected by the legislative council by a two-third majority), and a government formed with the participation of all components of the Lebanese society.

Some Lebanese who are labeled as the opposition were dissatisfied with the policies of the prime minister, Foad As-Sanyoura, and decided to pull out from the government. The Shiite ministers pulled out and, constitutionally, paralyzed the government. The speaker of the house stopped calling for parliamentary sessions explaining that the government becomes unconstitutional if a major Lebanese sect is not part of the government.

The Israeli war on Hizballah in July/2006 complicated the problem even more. Israel was defeated, or at least, couldn't achieve any of its objectives. Hizballah emerged as a major regional power, a thing that dismayed both Israel and the US. Before that, the two countries were interested in keeping Syria out of Lebanon, and having a friendly government, but now they are interested also in crippling Hizballah, disarming it and turning it into a political party without teeth. Israel couldn't do the job, and it has been thought that Lebanese internal powers can.

The UN Security Council was brought to the fore and decided that the only legitimate guns in Lebanon is the guns of the government, and all other guns should be laid down. Hizballah responded that its arms will be abandoned only when the Lebanese army becomes strong enough to defend the country against Israeli aggressions. The Lebanese forces friendly to the US have been trying to disarm Hizballah, but unable, and it seems that Hizballah has been smuggling new sophisticated arms across the borders with Syria.

The deadlock in Lebanon is linked to a the balance of powers in the region. Israel, the US and some allying Arab countries are unwilling to ease the tension because they would like to see Hizballah weakened and dragged into a civil war; while Hizballah, Syria and their allies in Lebanon would like to cripple the Lebanese government and keep away from a civil war. The pro-American forces have been provoking Hizballah, but it has avowed that if 1000 of its members are killed it will not go into civil war. And lately, the leader of Hizballah, Hassan Nasr Allah has threatened that Israel will be badly defeated in the coming war, and the whole region will then have a new face.

The arms twisting that is going on in Lebanon will most probably come to an end with the end of a new war that will erupt in the Middle East. The internal Lebanese situation will be settled in accordance with the result of the war. I expect Hizballah to win and the Lebanese friendly to the US will suffer a setback.