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How it all began - A concise history of Lebanon

To create a country is one thing; to create a nationality is another. In the wake of the first world war, which ended with the destruction of the German, Austro-Hungarian, Russian and Ottoman empires, it was possible for the victorious Allies to redraw the political map of much of the world. In Europe, Germany and Austria-Hungary, defeated in the war, re-emerged as the German, Austrian and Hungarian republics. Meanwhile, the Bolshevik revolution was already beginning to transform the Russian empire into the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. From European territories formerly German, Austro-Hungarian or Russian, new European states emerged. The overseas colonies of Germany, in Africa and elsewhere, were divided between Britain and France as mandates under licence from the newly organized League of Nations.

Meanwhile, the Ottoman empire, as a result of its defeat in the war, had virtually ceased to exist. The Turkish heartlands, successfully reclaimed from Allied occupation by the Kemalist revolution, were ultimately reconstituted as the Turkish Republic; but the Arab provinces in historical Mesopotamia and Syria were irretrievably lost, and subsequently divided between Britain and France, again as mandated territory, with the provision that they must be prepared as soon as possible for independence.

Here, as in Central and Eastern Europe, new states were formed, but with an important difference. In Europe, where nationalist thinking was already a firmly established tradition, the sense of separate nationality among the former subject peoples of the German, Austro-Hungarian and Russian empires was already in existence, and in most cases such clear and well-defined expectations were to be heeded in the formation of the new states. This was not the case with the Arab subjects of the Ottoman empire, where national consciousness, to the

extent that it existed, was blurred and confounded by traditional loyalties of other kinds which were often in conflict with one another. The Allies felt they could ignore such rudimentary and confused national sentiments among the Arabs of their newly mandated territories as they set out to reorganize them into states, redrawing the political map of the Arab world in the manner which they thought suited them best.

By the spring of 1920 agreement had been reached between Britain and France at San Remo on how the former Arab territories of the defunct Ottoman empire would be divided between them. The principal considerations taken into account were oil and communications. During the course of the war, the British had gone to considerable trouble to occupy Mesopotamia. The onset of the war had brought home the supreme strategic importance of oil; the British already had command over the vast oil resources of Iran, and they were determined to prevent the Germans, who were major shareholders in the Turkish Petroleum Company, from gaining access to the proven Mesopotamian oil resources of Kirkuk. In 1916, an agreement negotiated between Mark Sykes on behalf of Britain, and Francois Georges-Picot on behalf of France (the so-called Sykes-Picot Agreement), had assigned the Vilayet (Ottoman province) of Mosul, in northern Mesopotamia, to the French, and the vilayets of Baghdad and Basra, in central and southern Mesopotamia, to the British. In Syria, France was to get the Vilayet of Aleppo and the northern parts of the Vilayets of Beirut and Damascus, leaving the southern parts of these two vilayets essentially to Britain, with the understanding that the Holy Land of Palestine would have an international status. During the last months of the war however the British, who already occupied much of Mesopotamia, took occupation of Palestine. Now, at San Remo, the wartime Sykes-Picot Agreement between the two sides was scrapped.

By the terms of the new agreement, France gave up her claim to the Vilayet of Mosul in return for a major share in the Turkish Petroleum Company, which had been confiscated by the Allies and reorganized as the Iraq Petroleum Company (IPC). Moreover, the older agreement had specified that France would have direct control over the coastal parts of the Vilayet of Aleppo and its share of the Vilayet of Beirut, but only a sphere of influence in inland Syria where an Arab state or states of independent status would be established. Under the new agreement, the French were to have a free hand in the whole area which they were to hold as a mandate under the League of Nations - a continuous stretch of territory extending from the Euphrates river to the Mediterranean coast. On the other hand, the British, in addition to keeping the whole of Mesopotamia as a mandate, were also to have the mandate over all the southern parts of the vilayets of Damascus and Beirut - a territory which they first called the Palestine east and west of the Jordan; then, more simply, Transjordan and Palestine. In effect, Britain came to control a stretch of north Arabian desert' territory which secured the required contiguity between its Mesopotamian and Palestinian mandates, and an uninterrupted overland route all the way from the borders of Iran to the Mediterranean.

Apart from its agreement with France over the partition of the Arab provinces of the Ottoman empire, Britain had made promises during the war to other parties concerning the same area. In central Arabia, there was a standing British alliance with Abdul-Aziz Ibn Saud, the Wahhabi Emir of Riyadh who was subsequently to become the founder of the kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Wahhabism was a movement of militant Islamic religious revival which had

appeared in central Arabia in the middle decades of the eighteenth century, and the house of Saud had been politically associated with it since that time. In conflict with this British-Saudi alliance was the wartime alliance reached between Britain and Sharif Husayn, the Emir of Mecca, who enjoyed a special Arab and Islamic prestige as a recognized descendant of the Prophet, and whose family were called the Hashemites.

In return for leading an Arab revolt against the Ottomans, the Sharif had been promised recognition as the head of an Arab kingdom the exact nature of which was left undefined. The Sharif, however, was led to understand that it would include all of Mesopotamia; all but a negotiable strip of coastal Syria; and the whole of peninsular Arabia, except for the parts which were already established as British protectorates. While the British relations with Ibn Saud were maintained by the British government of India, those with the Sharif were initiated and pursued by the British Arab Bureau in Cairo. Meanwhile, the British Foreign Office, in close touch with the World Zionist Organization, had by 1917 formally committed itself to viewing with favour the establishment of a Jewish National Home in Palestine.

Naturally, it was impossible for Britain after the war to honour simultaneously all these conflicting commitments fully. The need to reach a settlement with France over the area was most pressing, and this was taken care of by the San Remo agreement. During the last months of the war, as the British drove the Ottoman forces out of Syria, with the forces of Sharif Husayn's Arab Revolt protecting their right flank, the Sharif's third and most popular son, Faysal, was allowed to enter Damascus and establish an Arab government on behalf of his father in that ancient Arab capital. As the Allies met at San Remo to redraw the map of the Arab world, Sharif Faysal was proclaimed King of Syria, with a view to place Britain and France before an accomplished fact. Once the San Remo agreement had been concluded, however, the French, already in occupation of Beirut, made a show of trying to reach an accommodation with King Faysal; they then crushed his forces at Maysalun, outside Damascus, forcing him to abandon his short-lived Syrian kingdom. To compensate their gallant wartime ally for his loss, the British created another Arab kingdom for him out of the old Ottoman vilayets of Mesopotamia, which now became the kingdom of Iraq.

The British wartime commitment to facilitate the establishment of a Jewish National Home in the Palestine west of the Jordan, which again received high priority, was formalized in 1920 and included as a special article in the statutes of the British mandate for Palestine, as registered in the League of Nations. For the Palestine east of the Jordan, or Transjordan, a special administrative arrangement was soon made. In 1916, when Sharif Husayn solemnly declared the start of the Arab Revolt against the Turks in Mecca, he also proclaimed himself king of the Arabs, and the British actually recognized him as king of the Hijaz, which was the furthest they felt they could go at the time. After the war, however, Ibn Saud, with his Wahhabi forces, began to attack the Hijaz, and completed its conquest by putting an end to Sharifian rule there in 1925.

In the earlier stages of the Saudi-Sharifian conflict, the Sharifian forces, led by the Sharif's second son Abdallah, suffered a serious defeat in battle. Sharif Abdallah thereupon left the Hijaz in 1921 and arrived in Transjordan, where the British soon recognized him as the sovereign emir. With British military help, Abdallah succeeded in repelling Wahhabi attempts to extend the Saudi domain northwards in the direction of Syria, thereby securing the extension of

Transjordan eastwards continuously to the border of Iraq. In the south, Abdullah's Transjordanian emirate extended beyond the borders of the old Ottoman Vilayet of Damascus to reach the Red Sea at the strategic Gulf of Aqaba, and so include the northernmost parts of what had formerly been the Ottoman Vilayet of the Hijaz. In the east, the border of the emirate, in the Jordan valley, set the limits beyond which the projected Jewish National Home in Palestine could not extend.

The British at the time knew what they wanted, and they got it: control over the oilfields of Iraq; unimpeded access from there to the Mediterranean; control of the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf (which were the two vital maritime highways leading to the Indian Ocean). To secure their interests, they naturally preferred to deal with parties in the area, or concerned with the area, who also knew what they wanted, and who were willing to make realistic accommodations to achieve their ends. During the war, the British had made a point of encouraging Arab nationalist activity in Syria against the Ottomans; and it was partly through British intermediaries that the Arab nationalists in Syria were put in touch with Sharif Husayn and his sons, which subsequently gave the Sharifian revolt in the Hijaz the extra dimension it needed to gain recognition as a true Arab Revolt. After the war, however, it became clear to the British that the claims of Arab nationalism were most urgently pressed either by romantic dreamers who were unwilling to be taught that politics was the art of the possible, or by unprincipled schemers who were out to secure personal rather than national interests. In either case, the nationalist claims, it was felt, where they threatened to embarrass British interests, could be discounted at negligible cost.

However, there remained Britain's wartime Arab allies to deal with. In the Hijaz, King Husayn was demanding more than the British were prepared to give. He wanted to be recognized as king of all the Arabs; considered himself the rightful claimant of the caliphate of Islam; and was unwilling to recognize the arrangements which the Allies were determined to introduce to the area in accordance with the San Remo agreement. More than that, he was adamant in refusing to recognize the Jewish claims in Palestine, as approved by the British. His two sons, Abdullah and Faysal, took the more realistic view; so did his great rival in Arabia, Ibn Saud. Those were practical men who were willing to give and take, and settle for what was ultimately achievable in given circumstances. In the arrangements which the British made in the parts of the area allotted to them, or where they already wielded dominant influence, all three were readily accommodated.

In their own mandated territories, which they called the Levant, the French took the same attitude as the British: they were willing to attend to reasoned and concrete demands by parties who knew what they wanted, but had no patience for the claims and clamours of those who did not. In Mount Lebanon and the adjacent parts of the old Vilayet of Beirut, the Maronites - a Christian communion with a long tradition of union with the Roman Catholic church in Europe - were one party whose demands the French were prepared to listen to. Of all the Arabs, barring only individuals or politically experienced princely dynasties, they appeared to be the only people who knew precisely what they wanted: in their case, as they put it, a 'Greater Lebanon' under their paramount control, separate, distinct and independent from the rest of Syria. Behind them, the Maronites had a rich and eventful past which will be reviewed as a separate story in due course.

In 1861, with the help of France, they had already secured a special political status for their historical homeland of Mount Lebanon as a mutessarrifate, or privileged sanjak (administrative region), within the Ottoman system, under an international guaranty. Since the turn of the century, however, the Maronites had pressed for the extension of this small Lebanese territory to what they argued were its natural and historical boundaries: it would then include the coastal towns of Tripoli, Beirut, Sidon and Tyre and their respective hinterlands, which belonged to the Vilayet of Beirut; and the fertile valley of the Bekaa (the four Kazas, or administrative districts, of Baalbek, the Bekaa, Rashayya and Hasbayya), which belonged to the Vilayet of Damascus. According to the Maronite argument, this 'Greater Lebanon' had always had a special social and historical character, different from that of its surroundings, which made it necessary and indeed imperative for France to help establish it as an independent state.

While France had strong sympathies for the Maronites, the French government did not support their demands without reserve. In Mount Lebanon, the Maronites had formed a clear majority of the population. In a 'Greater Lebanon', they were bound to be outnumbered by the Muslims of the coastal towns and their hinterlands, and by those of the Bekaa valley; and all the Christian communities together, in a 'Greater Lebanon', could at best amount to a bare majority. The Maronites, however, were insistent in their demands. Their secular and clerical leaders had pressed for them during the war years among the Allied powers, not excluding the United States. After the war, the same leaders, headed by the Maronite patriarch Elias Hoyek in person, pursued this course at the Paris Peace Conference; and in the end the French yielded. On 1 September 1920 - barely four months after the conclusion of the San Remo agreement; barely two months after the flight of King Faysal and his Arab government from Damascus - General Henri Gouraud, from the porch of his official residence as French High Commissioner in Beirut, proclaimed the birth of the State of Greater Lebanon, with Beirut as its capital. The flag of this new Lebanon was to be none other than the French tricolour itself, with a cedar tree - now hailed as the glorious symbol of the ancient country since Biblical times - featuring on the central white.

Following the establishment of the State of Greater Lebanon, the French turned to deal with the rest of their mandated territory in the Levant, where they were at a loss what to do. In the case of Lebanon, the Maronites had indicated precisely what they wanted. Elsewhere, no community seemed willing to speak its mind unequivocally, which left the French to their own devices. To begin with, in addition to Lebanon, they established four Syrian states: two of them regional, which were the State of Aleppo and the State of Damascus; and two of them ethno-religious, which were the State of the Alouites and the State of Jebel Druze. In response to strong nationalist demands, the states of Aleppo and Damascus were subsequently merged to form the State of Syria, later reconstituted as the Syrian Republic, to which Jebel Druze and the Alouite country were ultimately annexed. Meanwhile, on 23 May 1926, the State of Greater Lebanon received a Constitution which transformed it into the Lebanese Republic.

Thus the two sister republics came into being, Lebanon and Syria; both under French mandate, sharing the same currency and customs services, but flying different flags, and run by separate native administrations under one French

High Commissioner residing in Beirut. Before long, each of the two sister countries had its own national anthem. But are administrative bureaucracies, flags and national anthems sufficient to make a true nation-state out of a given territory and the people who inhabit it? What about the question of nationality?

To the Maronites and many other Christians in Lebanon, there were no doubts about the matter. The Lebanese were Lebanese, and the Syrians were Syrians, just as the Iraqis were Iraqi, the Palestinians Palestinian, and the Transjordanians Transjordanian. If the Syrians, Iraqis, Palestinians or Transjordanians preferred to identify themselves as something else, such as Arabs united by one nationality, they were free to do so; but the Lebanese remained Lebanese, regardless of the extent to which the outside world might choose to classify them as Arabs, because their language happened to be Arabic. Theirs, it was claimed, was the heritage of ancient Phoenicia, which antedated the heritage they had come to share with the Arabs by thousands of years. Theirs, it was further claimed, was the broader Mediterranean heritage which they had once shared with Greece and Rome, and which they now shared with Western Europe. They also had a long tradition of proud mountain freedom and independence which was exclusively theirs, none of their neighbours ever having had the historical experience.

Unfortunately for the Maronites, however, not everybody in Lebanon thought or felt as they did. There were even many Maronites who dissented and freely expressed their divergent views. After all, who could reasonably deny that Lebanon, as a political entity, was a new country, just as the other Arab countries under French or British mandate were? Certainly, Lebanon was as much a new country as the others, but with an important difference: it had been willed into existence by a community of its own people, albeit one community among others. Moreover, those among its people who had willed it into existence were fully satisfied with what they got, and wanted the country to remain forever exactly as it had been finally constituted, without any territory added or subtracted.

The Syrian Republic, it is true, had also been finally put together in response to nationalist demand; in fact, following a nationalist uprising which lasted more than two years (1925-7), provoking a French bombardment of Damascus. In Syria, however, the nationalists were only partly satisfied with what they got, and continued to aspire for much more. They knew what they did not want rather than what they wanted, and what they were opposed to more than what they were in favour of. For a brief term, they had had an Arab kingdom, with its capital in historical Damascus, once the seat of the great Umayyad caliphs and the capital of the first Arab empire. The French had destroyed their kingdom and established statelets on its territory, among them Lebanon. The Maronites, they argued, were perhaps entitled to continue to enjoy the sort of autonomy they had enjoyed since the 1860s in the Ottoman Sanjak of Mount Lebanon, although they had no real reason to feel any different from other Syrians or Arabs. On the other hand, they had no right securing for their Greater Lebanon Syrian territory which had formerly belonged to the vilayets of Beirut or Damascus, and which had never formed part of their claimed historical homeland.

>From the Arab nationalist point of view, it was not permissible to accord the French-created Lebanese Republic recognition as a nation-state separate and distinct from Syria. Moreover, from the same point of view, the Syrian Republic

itself was not acceptable as the final and immutable achievement of the aspirations of its people. The Syrians, after all, were Arabs, and their territory, historically, which had always included Palestine and Transjordan along with Lebanon, was not a national territory on its own, but part of a greater Arab homeland: a homeland whose ancient heartlands were Syria, Iraq and Arabia, but which, since Islam, had also come to include Egypt and the countries of North Africa all the way to the Atlantic. During the war years, the Allies had cheated the Arabs. The British had promised them national independence on their historical homelands, but they had failed to honour their promises. Instead, they had partitioned this Arab territory with the French, and committed themselves to hand over a particularly precious part of it, namely Palestine, to the Jews.

To accept all this, or any part of it, would be nothing less than high treason. Equally unacceptable in principle, though admittedly problems of a less pressing nature, were the continuing British control of Egypt; the Italian colonization of Libya; and the French and Spanish imperial presence in the remaining parts of North Africa. This concept of one indivisible Arab national homeland extending all the way from the Indian Ocean to the Atlantic was expressed by the Damascene nationalist and man of letters, Fakhri al-Barudi, in a song which enjoyed wide circulation:

The countries of the Arabs are my homelands: >From Damascus to Baghdad;
>From Syria to the Yemen, to Egypt, and all the way to Tetuan.

Significantly, the Syrian national anthem written by another Damascene nationalist, Khalil Mardam, did not sing the virtues of Syria as a nation-state standing by itself, but as the 'lion's den of Arabism', its glorious historical 'throne', and its sacred 'shrine'. By contrast the Lebanese national anthem, written by the Maronite poet Rashid Nakhleh, sang of the old men of Lebanon and the young, in the mountains and the plains, responding to the call of the historical fatherland and rallying around the 'eternal' cedar flag to defend 'Lebanon forever'.

Clearly, in the case of the Syrian Republic, the French had put together a state but failed to create a special nationality to go with it. The same, in a way, applied to Lebanon where, contrary to the claims of the national anthem, the concept of a natural and historical Lebanese nationality was meaningful to some people in the country, but not to others. The case was no different in the countries created by the British in their own mandated Arab territories.

In Palestine, which was assembled from what was formerly the Sanjak of Jerusalem and the southern parts of the Vilayet of Beirut, the British had deliberately attempted to recreate the Biblical Land of Israel, 'from Dan to Beersheba', where the Jews were to have their national homeland. The immigrant Jews actually called the country Eretz Israel, and looked forward to the day when it would be transformed into a Jewish state. To them, Palestine as a country was meaningful, but only as a prelude to something else: the Zionist concept of a Jewish nationality, reconstituted on what was conceived to be its historical home grounds. To its native Arab population, however, Palestine was no more of a natural country than Lebanon, Syria, Transjordan or Iraq, and might as well have been given another shape or size.

Transjordan, formed essentially out of the southern parts of the old Vilayet of Damascus, but with bits of Arabia added, was certainly not a natural country.

Apart from a few towns and small clusters of villages scattered along the highlands east of the Jordan valley, and some pastoral areas and grainlands here and there, this Arab emirate consisted mostly of open desert. Even its founder, Emir Abdullah, did not regard it as a real country. To him it was no more than historical Arab territory salvaged for the cause of the Great Arab Revolt, to serve one day as a base for the re-establishment of a Greater Arab Syria. Significantly, Emir Abdullah called his army not the Transjordanian, but the Arab Legion. To the British and others, Abdullah's emirate may have appeared as a recreation of the Biblical territory of Edom and Moab, or of the Roman province of Arabia; but such concepts, certainly at the time, were meaningless to the Transjordanians and did not readily contribute to a sense of separate historical nationality among them.

The British had hoped that Abdullah's younger brother Faysal, who was widely regarded in 1920 as the preeminent Arab national hero, would be a man of sufficient stature to make a real country out of Iraq, made up of the former Ottoman vilayets of Mosul, Baghdad, Basra and Shahrazor. Faysal's territory was declared politically independent almost immediately after its organization as a kingdom. Separated from other Arab countries by desert, and having the potential of enjoying a rich revenue from oil, Iraq could become a country on its own more easily than the others, as it had indeed been in ancient times, in the days of the Assyrians and the Babylonians. Internally, however, the Iraqis, apart from the Christian and Jewish minorities among them, were divided between Sunnites and Shiites, Arabs and Kurds. As King of Iraq, Faysal was surrounded by veterans of the Arab Revolt who had followed him to Baghdad in the flight from Damascus, and he himself never forgot his lost Syrian kingdom. His regime was more Arab nationalist than specifically Iraqi in character, dominated by the Sunnite Arab element and resented by the Shiite Arab element as well as by the Kurds. Much was indeed done under Faysal and his successors to assuage these resentments. Nevertheless, to the extent that it did develop, the sense of special nationality among the people of Iraq remained rudimentary and confused.

This was a new beginning in the history of the area: five countries formed out of Arab territory which had formerly been Ottoman, and none of them with a true or unarguable concept of special nationality to go with it. All things considered, all five of these countries were artificial creations established and given their initial organization by foreign imperial powers. Of the five, however, common Arab opinion singled out Lebanon as being an artificial creation of foreign imperialism in a special way. No one denied that the other four countries were equally artificial; the point lay elsewhere. Among the Syrians, Iraqis, Transjordanians and Palestinian Arabs, no one seriously advanced a thesis in support of the national validity of the given country. Among the Lebanese, however, there were those who did, which amounted to a serious aberration, and one which could not be allowed to pass. By refusing to accept the national validity of their given countries as a matter of Arab nationalist principle, the other Arabs, paradoxically, did manage in time to secure an accepted legitimacy for these countries as states. By the ready enthusiasm with which many Lebanese - but not all - accepted the validity of their country and the new nationality that went with it, what was immediately achieved was the exact reverse. The legitimacy of Lebanon alone as a state, for the Arabs in general and also among the Lebanese, remained in full question.

By willing not only a separate country but also a separate Lebanese nationality into existence, against the wishes of their neighbours and without the consent of

people who were forced to become their compatriots, the Maronites and their overwhelmingly Christian supporters in Lebanon had broken the Arab consensus - more particularly, the Syrian Arab consensus - and they had to pay the price. This price was to be significantly heavier as the Maronites had actively solicited the help of France to achieve their ends; even more so, because they had knowingly exhibited a marked insensitivity to Arab frustrations around them. In October 1918, when French forces landed in Beirut to put an end to the short-lived Arab government of Sharif Faysal there, Maronites and other Christians waving French flags had cheered their arrival at the port, hailing France as the 'tender, loving mother' (Arabic, al-umm al-hanun) who was to be their saviour. Among the Muslims of Beirut, who had watched the arrival of the French with grave apprehension, this was not a matter to be easily forgotten. Between 1918 and 1920, while these same urbane Muslims of Beirut stood sullenly by, or kept to their homes, rough and fierce-looking Maronite mountaineers had descended from their villages to demonstrate in the streets of the city which they already took to be their own, clamouring for an 'independent' Greater Lebanon, and threatening to migrate to Europe in a body if they did not get it. Going beyond their demand of Lebanese 'independence', by which they meant independence from Syria, not from the French mandate, the Maronites at the time had not hesitated to express their continuing hostility to the Arab regime which was still established in Damascus. Before they could attain their Greater Lebanon, France had first to actualize its control over the rest of its Syrian territorial claim, and the Arab regime in Damascus had to be destroyed. At the battle of the Maysalun Pass, in the Anti-Lebanon, the French did crush the forces of King Faysal in July 1920, which finally opened the way for their occupation of Damascus. Maronite volunteers reportedly fought with the French in the battle, and there were open Maronite celebrations of the French victory, or rather of the Arab defeat. This was not to be forgotten in Damascus.

The creation of the new Arab state system had hardly been completed by the late 1920s and early 1930s when political inertia and vested interests began to give it a reality. As men of political ambition began to compete for power and position in the different countries, and as each of these countries came to have its own ruling establishment and administrative bureaucracy, the lines of demarcation between them, hardly any of which was a natural or historical frontier, began to harden. Everywhere, circumspect rulers and career politicians who actually worked for the consolidation of the system, as their interests dictated, made a point of denying its immutable validity, and never missed an opportunity to denounce it as an imperialist partition of the single Arab homeland. Palestine in one way, and Lebanon in another, stood out as exceptions. In Palestine, Arabs who aspired for leadership could only make their mark by yielding to popular nationalist pressure, because of the Jewish threat. This forced them to obstruct repeated attempts by the British mandatory authorities to provide the country with a political government, because in any such government the Jews, with the international influence they wielded, were bound to be greatly over-represented. Thus, the politically ambitious among the Palestinian Arabs had to compete for the leadership of the nationalist opposition, not for power and position in an actual ruling establishment. In Lebanon, while the Christian political establishment dominated by the Maronites was fully determined to make a success of the state, there was a Muslim opposition which was equally determined to make of it a failure. Here the Christian ruling establishment, secure with the backing of France, spoke its mind freely and acted accordingly, while the opposition, with the moral backing

of the prevailing nationalist sentiment in Syria and other Arab countries, did the same.

It was not only the Christian political establishment, but also France who wanted to make of Lebanon a success; and France was fully alert to the country's fundamental problem: unless the Christians managed to sell the idea of Lebanon to their Muslim compatriots, Lebanon as a state could not gain the required minimum of legitimacy it needed, politically, to be truly viable. France, as the historical friend of the Maronites, was willing to do for them and their fellow Christians all it could do. It had already established for them the Greater Lebanon they wanted, to some extent against its better judgement. It now helped them to organize their state, and for the time being provided it with the needed power protection. More than that France could only give advice, because one day they would be on their own: the advice was given, and even pressed. Maronite leaders who accepted it, and began to show prudence in speech and action, were given all the necessary backing to reach office. Those who did not accept the advice received no support; and when they happened to be in office, they were left in political isolation, and their wiser opponents were helped to bring them down.

Originally, the Maronites had wanted Lebanon, politically, for themselves. When the country received its Constitution and became a parliamentary republic, the French saw to it that a Greek Orthodox Christian rather than a Maronite became its first president, with a Sunnite Muslim as a speaker of its parliament; but the Maronites nevertheless managed to secure for themselves all other key positions in the government and the administration, and ultimately the presidency of the republic as well. What made this possible, at the initial stages, was the effective boycott of the state by all but a handful of the Sunnite Muslims, who were the only community in the country who could have stopped the Maronites from achieving their virtual monopoly of power at the time. Stage by stage, however, the French saw to it that the effectiveness of this Muslim boycott of the state was eroded, and pressed on the Maronite leaderships the vital necessity of giving the Muslims enough stake in the country to encourage them to help maintain the state. To many Maronites, this appeared as an outright French betrayal of their cause. Others were willing to learn, though not always as much as needed.

In Lebanon, however, the Christians on the whole had an advantage over the Muslims. By and large, in rank and file, they were socially far more developed or, more correctly, far more familiar with the ways of the modern world. This placed them in a position to provide the country, for a long time, with most of the needed infrastructure. It also enabled them to provide a social gloss which covered the fragile and faulty structure of the state and the social tension which lay underneath, mainly due to the glaringly uneven development of the different Lebanese communities and regions. Outside Lebanon, except for Egypt, this kind of gloss at the time, on the required scale, was not to be found elsewhere in the Arab world. It certainly existed in Palestine, even more so than in Lebanon; but there it was provided largely by the European Jewish settlers rather than by the Palestinian Arabs, among whom development was limited to a small middle and upper class.

What further helped to cover up the faults of Lebanon was the stunning natural beauty of the country, coupled with its pleasant Mediterranean climate. Lebanon, moreover, was relatively green, and could appear lush green - a

veritable paradise - by contrast with the desert which began as one crossed the eastern borders from the Bekaa valley into Syria. Where else, in the Arab world, could one see majestic peaks capped with snow for much of the year, rising hoary above terraced mountain slopes dotted with the red roof-tops of countless villages nestled among orchards or vineyards, set against a stark blue sky, and directly overlooking the sparkling waters of the Mediterranean? Yet another initial advantage of the country was its geographic location, which could make of it the ideal gateway from the West to the Arab world. In addition to all this, there was the experienced mercantile initiative and exceptional adaptability of the people, and the cultural tolerance which they generally exhibited, most notably in the coastal cities, and most of all in cosmopolitan Beirut.

All that Lebanon needed to be a success was political accord and an even social development among the different communities which had come to form its population and in the different regions it had come to comprise. However, for two reasons, it was exactly these conditions that proved hard to reach. First, the Maronites in Lebanon were determined to maintain their own paramount control of the state, and were fundamentally unwilling to have Christians and Muslims share in the country as political equals; their argument was that the Muslims were naturally susceptible to the strong influence of their co-religionists in other Arab countries, and could therefore not be trusted with the more sensitive political and administrative positions in Lebanon, such as those which involved national security and ultimate decision making. Second, the prevalent nationalist mood in the Arab world, especially in Syria, was against Lebanon achieving political success; and within the country, the Muslim sector of the population could easily be swayed by external Arab nationalist influence, and could be used by other Arab countries as political leverage to keep the Lebanese state perennially unstable. For the duration of the French mandate in the Levant, Lebanon was adequately protected against such destabilizing Arab interventions in its affairs. The real problems of the country, however, were to come blatantly into the open as soon as the French mandate came to an end, leaving an independent Lebanon at the mercy of external and internal forces acting in the name of Arab nationalism with which the Lebanese state, in the long run, was unable to come to reasonable terms.

Thus in Lebanon, from the very beginning, a force called Arabism, acting from outside and inside the country, stood face to face with another exclusively parochial social force called Lebanism; and the two forces collided on every fundamental issue, impeding the normal development of the state and keeping its political legitimacy and ultimate viability continuously in question. Each force, at the internal level, claimed to represent a principle and ideal involving a special concept of nationality; yet in each case one had to look behind the articulated argument to discover the real nature of the quarrel. True, there were individuals in Lebanon who sincerely believed in the historical and political validity of Lebanism, and others who were committed to Arabism with equal sincerity. But it was certainly no accident that the original proponents of Lebanism in the country were almost exclusively Christians, and for the most part Maronites, while the most unbending proponents of Arabism, as a community, were the Muslims. Clearly, in both cases, what was actually said by way of argument on the surface covered something else underneath: the source of the problems. What was this underlying element in each case, which made the declared positions of the two sides so irreconcilable as to keep the question of Lebanon. interminably, an outstanding one?

***Kamal Salibi** is the foremost living historian of Lebanon, and his new book is even more important than his earlier one because it throws light on the present and future of the country as well as its past. With unique knowledge and insight, he shows how the ideas of the various communities and groups about what Lebanon is and should be are rooted in very different visions of history.*
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