

LEBANESE PEOPLE POWER OUSTS SYRIA

Peaceful means prevail in country with civil-war history

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Last spring the world witnessed massive protests in the streets of Lebanon. The protests, along with the contribution of a UN resolution and international pressure, led to Syrian withdrawal of its twenty-nine year presence in Lebanon. The protests drew thousands of Lebanese, and brought together people holding opposing perspectives on the issue of Syrian occupation. Although the people did not share the same vision for their country, they did share the method they took up to voice their beliefs. As Rami G. Khouri stated in an article in the Lebanese Daily Star, “That they all wave the Lebanese flag, rather than their factional banners, is an important indicator that... the forces of composure, compromise and peaceful consensus-building are stronger than any inclination to fight.” In a region that has experienced much violence in its past, this alternative is promising and shows that a transformation has occurred in Lebanon.

The violence that occurred in Lebanon’s recent past has roots that go back to the end of French imperialism. In 1943, a National Pact was created forming political representation based on religious affiliation. According to the French system, the country is to have a Maronite Christian President, a Sunni Muslim Prime Minister, a Shi’a Muslim

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Speaker of the Chamber of Deputies and a legislative assembly split between Muslim and Christian representatives based on population figures. This connection between religion and politics has led to much conflict in the country that escalated in 1975, when demographics radically shifted causing a change in political power as well. This



ignited a 15-year civil war which ravaged the country and was further complicated by the presence of Palestinian refugees who entered the country in 1948. Israel entered Lebanon in the late 1960’s after being attacked by Palestinians in Lebanon, leading to an

Israeli—Lebanese war. Once the civil war began, Syria intervened to restore the peace, but also had its own political interests in mind. The civil war was about religious, political, cultural and ideological discrepancies that were not always clear-cut and led to the rapid formation and disintegration of alliances during the struggle.

The protests last spring have an intimate tie to the former civil war because much of the protesting revolved around the issue of the Syrian occupation of Lebanon that began during the civil war. Syria justified a continued presence by claiming it stabilized the country. The wave of protests began after February 14th, the day former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri was assassinated. Hariri supported the position of Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon as did UN Security Council resolution 1559 passed in September 2004. However, critics to this position, including Abu Khalil, question Hariri’s relationship with Syria. Khalil justifies his stance by citing such events as Hariri’s awarding the Key of Beirut to the head of Syrian intelligence in Lebanon in October 2002. During this event, while speaking about Syria, Hariri said, “Your presence among us resolved many of the problems and difficulties, and removed many of the obstacles that faced the state upon its rise.” Though Hariri’s intentions might be contested, his death did ignite the protests of those opposed to Syrian presence. These protests calling for Syrian withdrawal led other Lebanese to show their support for Syria and distrust of Western influence invading their country.



Lebanese civilians watch over a giant Hizbullah demonstration in March, 2005. (Naira Der Kiureghian)



Over 800,000 Lebanese took to the streets of Beirut on March 14, 2005, the one month anniversary of the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. The religiously diverse, peaceful crowd chanted “Freedom, Sovereignty, Independence” and supported a Syrian withdrawal. International media estimated it to be far larger than the competing pro-Syria rally.

The conflict in Lebanon is complex and has developed over decades but the Lebanese people have learned from their experience of violence. The destruction and misery caused by the civil war led the Lebanese people to seek a different manner of expressing their differences and it has proven a powerful force in bringing about change. The protests that occurred throughout the country gathered hundreds of thousands of participants and were organized by Lebanese on both ends of the spectrum regarding the issue of Syrian withdrawal. Pro-Syrian protests generally had an anti-Bush/anti-American sentiment and were primarily organized by the Hizbullah party and Amal. Those opposing occupation were represented by groups including the Free Patriotic Front, Taysar al-Mustaqbal (Tide of the Future), and National Liberation Party which tended to include more affluent members of Lebanese society. The protests brought together diverse groups of people unifying under a common cause.



Minister Rafik Hariri, was one of the speakers at the event. While she alludes to Lebanese enemies in her speech, she also mobilizes nonviolent rhetoric. She describes Syrians

One of the major protests pressuring for Syrian withdrawal occurred on March 14th when over 800,000 people gathered in Beirut at Martyr's square. Sidon MP Bahia Hariri, sister of the assassinated former Prime

as brothers and calls for the creation of a country of justice, equality, and dignity achieved through unity instead of division. “To those who fear that the Lebanese will be divided, we say that preventing division cannot be achieved by fear and retreat, but rather by going ahead toward concurrence, toward the truth, toward the future...we will not fall prey to divisions reminiscent of 1975.” Hariri speaks of a country where people with opposing views work together to achieve a solution in which all parties will gain. It is hard to tell if these words represent true principled nonviolence or if they are simply being utilized to gain support. However, Hariri makes a connection between the countries violent past and the promise of a nonviolent future. These ideals have the potential to make a strong impact on those who relate to what she is saying and wish to live in peace. Hopefully, this will spur the movement to act upon these ideals and make them a reality, taking nonviolent principles beyond the speech. This type

of thinking can prevent the country from falling prey to another war.

Those not opposed to Syrian presence in Lebanon similarly used protests to demonstrate their support of Syria and distrust of Western influence. On March 13th over 200,000 people gathered in Nabatieh, protesting against UN Security Council Resolution 1559 and to show loyalty to Syria. This protest was called by Hizbullah, Amal, and other pro-government parties and also included anti-Bush slogans on banners. Although the US media is generally biased against this side of the conflict, it is important to remember these groups used protest instead of violence and chose a constructive path as opposed to a destructive one. These groups were critical of US influence in favor of anti-Syrian sentiment, proclaiming that such US influence is intertwined with support of Israel.



The protests culminated in complete withdrawal of Syrian troops on April 26th, after a ceremony that was held at the Rayak army base close to the Syrian border. A monument was erected to commemorate Syrian military presence in Lebanon upon which both Syrians and Lebanese placed flowers. Kofi Annan, the United Nations secretary general, dispatched a team to verify whether Syria had withdrawn all its troops from Lebanon in accordance with

the UN Security Council resolution.

Syrian withdrawal did not magically end the conflict in Lebanon but instead raised many difficult issues about Lebanon's future. The UN is actively pursuing an investigation on the murder of Hariri and has placed pressure upon Syria to cooperate. The investigation is being led by German prosecutor Detlev Mehlis, and has identified suspects believed to be involved in the assassination. This investigation has created tension in Lebanon that has manifested itself in car bombings targeted against leaders and communities. Syrian withdrawal has also had political effects with worldwide support for free elections in Lebanon. These elections took place in May and June and the 128 legislative seats were divided among Saad Hariri's anti-Syrian bloc (72 seats), the Amal-Hezbollah alliance (35 seats), and the Free Patriotic Movement (21 seats). The question of Syrian and US influence in Lebanon remains unresolved. The country remains divided on many key issues and as one Lebanese man and founder of the Lebanese Political Journal stated, "Our national unity has a long way to go. The lines of division run deep and cannot be solved by small political patches." The future of Lebanon is fraught with uncertainty, but if the people continue to adopt ideals of resolving differences through conversation and protest they will not succumb to the violence of their recent history.



Lebanese musician Marcel Khalife performed during the civil war to keep people's spirits alive.

The country has the backing of various Lebanese intellectuals and artists in their nonviolent efforts. Many espouse nonviolent ideals and have helped bring their country through tough times and deal with cultural discrepancies between Middle Eastern and Western cultures.

Once such man is musician Marcel Khalife, who was born in Lebanon in 1950 and has traveled throughout the world giving solo performances on the traditional oud instrument. During the civil war he "performed in abandoned Beirut concert halls, intent on keeping people's spirits alive during a time of utter despair ... singing the great poetry of the Middle East, making it accessible and meaningful to sufferers on both sides of the war." Khalife makes

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-Sidon MP Bahia Hariri

his traditional music available to all Lebanese to uplift the people. Today, he focuses on the cultural realm, sensitive to Western influence in Lebanon and the effects it has on Lebanese culture. Influential figures such as Khalife can play an important role in transformative struggles by giving hope to the people and keeping

them on a nonviolent path.

Lebanon is currently undergoing many critical changes and has yet to resolve some important issues. Last spring demonstrated a hopeful prospect to the coming challenges the nation will face, as people were able to channel dissent into protests and speeches instead of succumbing to arms. Whether or not principled nonviolence or strategic nonviolence was mobilized is hard to say, and most likely the movement represented a combination of the two. The biases of the corporate media do not aid in this analysis and it can thus be hard to resolve from a distance. The mobilization of the international media and influence of foreign countries undoubtedly played a major role in Syrian withdrawal and will continue to be important in the realization of a stable outcome. Hopefully, the people will continue to use nonviolent methods to solve the next set of conflicts they encounter and perhaps then, it will be easier to analyze whether nonviolence was embraced strategically or spiritually. Either way the efforts of the people were significant and inspiring and cannot be overlooked.

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