

*Recent experiences of conflict, dialogue and coexistence  
in the Near East, with special reference to Lebanon*

## BEYOND LEBANESE POLITICAL REFORM: A RECONCILIATION WITH BASIC VALUES

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A recent visitor to Lebanon told me how struck he was with the fact that all the Lebanese seemed to speak the same language, to say the same things, to express the same dreams, to be haunted by the same fears. For me this is a symptom that there is no real need for reconciliation among Lebanese. Urgent, on the contrary, is the reconciliation between all the Lebanese and a number of basic values they have often repudiated during the war.

First, a reconciliation with modesty. In peacetimes, the Lebanese tended to view themselves as superior to their neighbours, and their country as an oasis of peace and tolerance in a regional environment characterized by authoritarianism and instability. In wartime, they were reluctant to recognize the harm they were enthusiastically inflicting on themselves and on a country they pretended to cherish. Such a presumption rendered their relation to their own past inaccurate and their perception of their environment unrealistic. Today, with many dozens of thousands killed, a country destroyed, and a bankrupt government, they should be humble enough to confess that their relation to legality was largely superficial, their attachment to democracy insufficiently rooted, and their openness of mind, legendary as it may have been portrayed, accompanied by outbursts of political tribalism which they passively inherited from some of their uninspired ancestors.

Second, a reconciliation with their past. Lebanese factions have written different histories of their country. Each faction had its hero, ancient or modern, each had its promised land, its valued act, its mental set of references. A reconciliation with the past means that Lebanese have to understand that none of the Lebanese factions can truly be proud of its own past. However, they can develop the pride of being able and willing to live together. None of the Lebanese factions has had a tradition of democratic

rule, but all the factions together were able to produce a consociational democracy, based on consensus and beneficial to each of them. Each faction's infatuation with its own history has been the daily bred of the civil war. It is, therefore, urgent to establish a common, consensual reading of the past, acceptable to all Lebanese and to professional historians as well.

Third, a reconciliation with geography. This means that Lebanese have to accept their country's borders as they are, once and for all, and to accept that schemes to partition it along sectarian lines have proven costly and unfeasible. A reconciliation with geography also means that the various parts of the country must have the same value for all of us, and that unequal development of these parts was one of the causes of war. The concentration of half of the population in Beirut and its suburbs before the war is a precedent not to be repeated. The lack of interest in the Biqa or the Akkar was irresponsible. Finally a reconciliation with geography means a clear perception that Lebanon is being far from an island. An island mentally triggers an isolationist policy based on the dream of an autonomous enclave transformed into an impregnable fortress. This myth has too often been the origin of terrible geo-strategic miscalculations on the part of some of the Lebanese leaders. Lebanon is not an island and the Lebanese do not have the means to build a fortress. The only military fortress in the Middle East is built to the south of the Lebanese borders and it has proved to be a threatening neighbour and an inadequate model.

Fourth, a reconciliation with diversity. The war was comprised of foolish and contradictory attempts to impose a single definition of Lebanon, a single norm on how to be Lebanese. There is indeed one Lebanon, but there are many ways to express our belonging to it. Forcible social integration has been a disaster in all plural

societies. The Iraqi example before our eyes — not to mention the Yugoslav or the Soviet ones — of energetic state-controlled attempts to melt social segments together in the name of some ideology. This has not worked elsewhere, this will never work in Lebanon. A peaceful Lebanon is, by definition, a «house of many mansions.»

Fifth, a reconciliation with modernity. Many Lebanese would not easily recognize that their relation to modernity has been selective, partial, and, on the whole, superficial. Looking back into the Lebanon we grew up in one could not easily notice how some sectors have rapidly been modernizing - the school system, the banking system, communications, the arts, - while other sectors remained static, closed, impervious to the winds of change: family structures, legal systems, and, most notably, political organisations. Here we see another form of unequal development, projecting certain social activities into the next millennium and keeping others in the past century. A peaceful Lebanon is one where modernity is not selective and modernization is harmonious, progressing equally in all social spheres.

Sixth, a reconciliation of the Lebanese with their government. For too many years, the Lebanese have been proud of having a very weak state apparatus, for relying solely on their private initiative. The time has come for them to recognize that such a minimalist view of what a government should be and what the government should do, is a recipe for anarchy at home and foreign interference in their domestic affairs. Lebanese hostility to a government in control of society, dominating private entrepreneurship, emasculating free initiative, is deeply rooted and healthy. But to make a dogma of government impotence will naturally lead to chaos and anarchy.

Government should be able to regulate if not in control; to set the rules; to be the umpire. The Lebanese should come to terms with the idea of a potent state apparatus, setting limits to their freedom without destroying them, arbitrating without imposing, being efficient without being coercive. More specifically, Lebanese should reconcile themselves to an efficient, national professional, non-political army - the only real, lasting alternative to militia rule as well as to politically ambitious generals.

Finally the Lebanese should come to terms with their future. Those among them who feel militarily defeated, politically marginalized, culturally unrecognized, should develop confidence in the country's future. Today, there is a substantial sector of the Lebanese population, most notably among Christians, who feel estranged vis-à-vis the post-Taif system. Those Lebanese should not be alienated by their fellow countrymen. They, have, for their part, to adjust to the new formula and to find a niche for themselves. Those Lebanese are aware that their country badly needs them; they should also understand that they need their country as well. Individually, they will be able to succeed elsewhere, only in Lebanon can they dream of a collective resurgence.

No, there is no need for reconciliation among Lebanese; but pressing is a reconciliation of all Lebanese with these common, basic values. There is no need for

political reform either, since Taif has provided us with a constitutional framework generally considered an acceptable reform of the Lebanese institutions. Urgent, on the contrary, is the reform of the political mores and practices in a country plagued with a political establishment which is far from being innocent.

There is no need to rewrite Taif. Let us recognize that those who acknowledge that there is no alternative to the legal authorities that emerged from the Taif agreement, have seen their own numbers grow in the past few months. But Taif should never be considered as the optimal regime for Lebanon. It was, in fact, a pragmatic compromise at a certain point of time among certain groups and individuals. Many political scientists would persuasively argue that the formula produced there is unbalanced, crippled, or dogmatic. Hence, the necessity for a creative interpretation of this basic document, which will make the formula flexible enough to permit its own transformation.

Disputed as it may be, the Taif agreement had a quality no other proposal ever had: it was doable. The error today would be to freeze it as it is, to make a sort of holy gospel. The Taif agreement was a formula to get out of the war. It is therefore an insufficient foundation on which to build a lasting peace. Let us not forget that one crucial ingredient of the civil war was the 1943 formula's inadequacy regarding the social, demographic, and economic changes that took place in the decades between independence and the eruption of the civil war in 1975. Let us not repeat the same error. A political system is strong when it provides for legal and peaceful ways for its own amendment, for its adjustment to changes in society.

A creative interpretation of the Taif accords would not mean a selective, partial, incomplete one. All paragraphs should be given the same attention. If the constitutional aspects have already been incorporated as articles in our renovated constitution, the same care should be given other issues in the Taif compromise such as decentralization, the reform of the electoral law, the modernization of the administration, and, more importantly, the dissolution of all militias and Syrian troop redeployment according to schedule. Taif was a compromise; to be effective, this compromise has to be implemented *in toto*, and *in bona fide*. A number of confidence-building measures could be rapidly adopted by the Lebanese government as well as Syria in order to dispel the fears of those who, understandably, think that the interpretation of the Taif agreement has been up till now imbalanced in favour of those who were parties to it.

Beyond Taif the very definition of politics in Lebanon must be called into question. For too long, politics in Lebanon has been a vehicle for personal enrichment, social status, upward mobility, and clientelistic practices. Nepotism was an organic feature of the system before Taif and there are many reasons to think that nepotism remains a current practice. The need is urgent to reconsider politics as a road to wealth and social status. The idea of politics as that which should serve the community has been absent for much too long from our

political culture. The time is ripe to redefine politics along this line.

Finally, going beyond Taif means going beyond those who made Taif possible. Stability in Lebanon depends on the system's ability to reconstitute the political elite, to allow for a large circulation of people in government. The Taif formula was meant to incorporate into a state system those who were active outside the state realm, and usually against it, during the war. But those people should not be alone reaping the peace dividends. Militias have prevented large sectors of the population from participating in politics. The time has come to open those jails, called sectarian groups, to open the doors of politics not only for those who fought during the war, but for those who fought against the war itself. If warlords cannot be ignored, the war victims must also be part of the system, unless the peace between the warlords is to end in a truce. Taif has given us the means to put the warlords around the same table. Now that this is done, the peacelords should also be invited to it. Peace is too serious a matter to be left to warlords, even when partly disarmed.

Too many signals have been given that the post-Taif system favours two categories of people: traditional pre-war politicians and militia warlords. This impression has unfortunately been triggered by the way the two post-Taif cabinets have been formed as well as by the recent filling of parliamentary seats. It is hoped that this unhealthy practice will not be reinforced in the upcoming appointment of some 80 prominent positions in the civil service. Taif would then be largely monopolized by those groups it was supposed to neutralize. If it is unrealistic to ignore pre-war politicians and warlords, it would be a tragic error to entrust them largely with the country's future.

In conclusion, the most urgent reconciliation is between Lebanon's government and its new generations, and the most crucial reform is that of the political elite itself. Only a transfusion of new blood, an introduction of peace-loving, modern competent individuals into a ruling system will allow Lebanon, not only to extricate itself from the war, but also, and more importantly, to build a lasting peace.