# 5 Sectarian conflict

## Lebanon, state without a nation

The Lebanese state, which formally gained independence from the French in 1946, has been weak and precarious to say the least. The denominational system of politics and government in Lebanon has institutionalized sectarian differences between Christians and Muslims, who are further divided into a variety of denominations frequently at odds with each other. The sectarianism of politics has been the major factor propelling the Lebanese into conflict with each other. The savage civil war of 1975 to 1990, which left 100,000 dead, was complicated and exacerbated by the introduction of a Palestinian dimension and the consequent intrusion of two external powers, Israel and Syria, fighting their battles by proxy using allies among Lebanese society. With the enforced withdrawal of Israel and its surrogate militia from southern Lebanon in May 2000, against the background of some progress towards a comprehensive Middle East peace settlement, the prospects for the future stability of the country should have improved, but the domestic political system remains corrupt and flawed. Making sense out of the Lebanese tragedy and learning the lessons from this conflict is an ongoing project.

For many years Lebanon has been a classic example of a deeply divided society. There are obvious parallels with several other countries, including South Africa under apartheid, Northern Ireland and the former Yugoslavia. During the civil war Lebanese frequently killed each other for purely religious reasons, as white killed black (and vice versa) in the old South Africa and as Protestant killed Catholic (and vice versa) at times of seemingly mindless sectarian violence in Northern Ireland. In all three countries wider political contexts and external influences have distorted and aggravated religious, ethnic and racial divisions. Yet, as many writers have pointed out, Lebanon in the 1960s was held up as an example of a country that was an oasis of calm in a troubled region. To quote Albert Hourani, it was 'a country which had achieved an almost miraculous balance between different communities and interests, and which was enjoying political stability and

*Map C* – Lebanon

peace, a comparative neutrality in the conflicts of the region, and a prosperity which seemed to be self-perpetuating'.[1] So what went wrong?

Some of the answer lies in geography and much in history. The country is mainly mountainous behind a narrow coastal strip with a society made up of communities of ancient origin.[2] For most of the nineteenth century Ottoman imperial appointees sought to impose order on the various ethnic and religious minorities who had traditionally sought refuge from central authority on the 'Mountain', and who jockeyed for influence elsewhere in the more accessible areas. These officials, as part of the attempts by

Constantinople to centralize imperial authority, tried to extend their influence by undermining the long-standing system of feudal chiefly rule, which had held sway in the mountain fastnesses.

A significant development in the mid-nineteenth century was increasing interest and involvement in the Levant – the area that is now Israel, Lebanon and Syria – by the European powers, in particular France, whose self-imposed 'civilizing' mission in the region (exporting French culture and influence) involved offering protection to the Christian communities in Lebanon. France's first intervention in 1860 followed the destruction of a large number of Maronite (Christian) villages by their Druze (Muslim) rivals, allied to the Ottoman authorities. Subsequently an autonomous 'Little Lebanon' was established in the central mountains, with a Maronite majority and a Christian governor ruling with a multi-denominational council formed on a proportional basis: four Maronite, three Druze, two Greek Orthodox, one Greek Catholic, a Shi'ite Muslim and a Sunni Muslim. The Turkish authorities appointed the governor with the agreement of France and Britain, which was also seeking a role in the area in support of its commercial interests.[3] This religiously defined balance foreshadowed the political structure of a larger modern Lebanon, and European rivalry was finally settled in favour of France during the First World War: the Anglo-French Sykes–Picot Agreement of 1916[4] was endorsed by the award of a mandate for Lebanon (and Syria) to France at San Remo in 1920, following the post-war dissolution of the Ottoman Empire.

Thus 'modern' Lebanon emerged as a distinct geopolitical entity. It was constructed from part of the former Ottoman Greater Syria (referred to as 'Geographical Syria' in the Sykes–Picot Agreement). This new country was in effect a 'Greater Lebanon', twice as large as its 'Little' predecessor and with a more complicated sectarian diversity in which the combined Christian majority had been reduced from 79 per cent to 53 per cent of a population of just over 600,000.[5] Other new Middle Eastern countries created (or foreshadowed) by the colonial powers within artificial, unnatural frontiers at the same time as Lebanon also had inbuilt fault lines – both ethnic and religious. Israel, Turkey, Iraq and Syria are cases in point. But they could not match Lebanon's confessional jigsaw puzzle encompassing three significant Christian denominational divisions and three Muslim ones, plus a number of smaller Christian splinter groups.[6] A further potentially destabilizing factor was that there was no numerically dominant group forming an overwhelming majority of the population. The difference in numbers between the three major groups – Maronite, Sunni and Shi'a – is relatively small, with no single community accounting for even half the population. This is in stark contrast to some other countries with deep ethnic or religious divisions, such as Cyprus, Malaysia, South Africa, India (post-partition) and

the Sudan.[7] A society deeply divided into even two factions is not a recipe for harmony; so how much more problematic is the situation in Lebanon, where there is great fragmentation within already complicated divides?

Until 1943, when they lost their influence, the French dominated the Lebanese scene as a neo-imperial power. Communal differences were deliberately reinforced by a familiar colonial ploy of divide and rule. Under the guise of a fairly structured inter-sect political system, the French in effect reproduced the former confessional arrangements of the 'Little' Lebanon in the 'Greater', as if the Christians were still in a large majority. Accordingly, the Francophile Christians predominated with the connivance of the mandatory authorities, and their share of the important offices of state – including the presidency – was out of proportion to their ever-shrinking numerical superiority. (The census of 1932 estimated that the Christians constituted 51.3 per cent of the population.[8]) In consequence, almost half the population of the new Lebanon felt disempowered and many refused to work within the system. The Sunnis, a community dominated by notables educated under the former Ottoman Empire, opposed the very existence of the state. They yearned for a pan-Syrian identity, with many of them agitating for union of Muslim-dominated areas with Syria when in 1936 the French mandatory authority recognized the principle of Syrian independence with the establishment of the Syrian republic. Shi'ite notables tended to cooperate with the French, but ordinary Shi'as were suspicious of Christian domination. The other significant sect with Muslim origins, the Druze, also controlled by traditional chiefly families, was divided in its attitude to the government. Although disliking the Maronites, the powerful Jumblatt family, at least, was prepared to work with the French. Nor were the Christians united, with the Greek Orthodox – although concerned about Muslim rule – jealous of Catholic (Maronite) domination.

Stoten argues that Lebanon, although a recognized state, had not, even by the end of the civil war in 1990, developed the attributes of nationhood.[9] Imported European notions of statehood, of government independent of religious affiliation, made little impact in a country composed of a heterogeneous kaleidoscope of religious groups, all of whom were determined to protect parochial political interests. As we have just discussed, this was certainly true of Lebanon under the French mandate, where much of the population felt excluded from a share in power yet trapped within a state whose boundaries seemed to ensure perpetual control by one community supported by an external power. (This was not too far removed from the situation in Northern Ireland as perceived by the Catholic nationalist minority.) In the modern era most Europeans have become used to associating themselves with nation-states rather than an exclusive religious affiliation, but in the 1990s we have witnessed a new phenomenon with the

breakdown of the politics of national identity. Now many European states (among them Belgium, Spain, the UK, former Yugoslavia and former Soviet Union) are experiencing the emergence of parochial nationalist and separatist tendencies and resisting supra-identity packaging within a wider European identity.

Another weakness of the Lebanese system (particularly during the mandate, but it has continued to inhibit normal political development in more recent times) has been the domination by notables, or small conservative elites. This was as true of the Christian factions, such as the modern Maronite descendants of the neo-feudal 'Lords of the Valley', as it was of the Muslims, whether under the sway of leading Druze families or their Sunni counterparts, among whom a handful of families tended to fill any ministerial posts that came their way. The Shi'a leadership similarly came mostly from large landowning families, and all of these notables, whatever their confessional background, protected their privileged positions by discouraging popular participation in the political arena. Up to 1957, 40 per cent of the parliamentary seats were held by landowners. Such political parties as did emerge and were represented within parliament were factional groupings or coalitions.[10] Ideologically motivated parties were active, but mostly outside the legislature, and even these tended to have a religiously doctrinal basis. Some of the Christian parties were also influenced by the European fascist movements of the 1930s.

Full formal independence for Lebanon in 1946 did not mark a new beginning, although it finally removed the French as players in its internal affairs. The 'National Pact' of three years previously was actually a more important milestone in the development of modern Lebanon. In essence this was an (unwritten) constitutional arrangement accommodating sectarian differences prevalent at that time, and it marked the culmination of a growing rapprochement between Maronite and Sunni elites. However, although an important reference point in the short history of Lebanon, in practice, as far as domestic politics were concerned, it represented little more than a fine-tuning of previous sectarian power-sharing formulas between the two principal participants, with provision for participation by other religious groups.[11] It entrenched a rigid system of sharing out the three top jobs: a Christian President, a Sunni Prime Minister and a Shi'a Speaker of Parliament. The Druze, further down the pecking order, were to provide the Foreign Minister. This system of government by triumvirate was still in place at the end of the twentieth century. The Pact, despite attempts by the French to retain some say in Lebanese affairs, paved the way for an independent Lebanon – this being the goal for Christians and Sunnis alike. It also represented a compromise between the Christian leaders who were shrugging off French tutelage and protection, and Muslim leaders turning

away from pan-Arabism in accepting Lebanon as a separate entity – a country with an 'Arab appearance', as it was described at the time.[12]

Thus Lebanon entered the post-Second World War era with the same flawed sectarian and elite-dominated system, with power shared mainly between the Maronites and the Sunnis, that it had experienced under the mandate. Yet from 1943 until 1975, with one hiccup in 1958, the Lebanese political system seemed successful in providing a basis for considerable political freedom and prosperity. Of all the Middle East governments, that in Beirut was the least intrusive. It practised *laissez-faire* at its most strikingly liberal, even largely absenting itself from the educational sector: only 40 per cent of children were at government schools in 1959, with most pupils at private religious institutions, which of course did nothing to help bring diverse communities together. Lebanon, with its liberalized market economy, free trade and the absence of exchange controls, became the banking centre of the Middle East and one of its main commercial hubs. This apparent prosperity, however, concealed a growing division between the Christian and Sunni elites (who benefited most from this commercial and financial activity) and the urban and rural poor. Among the underclass were an increasing number of Shi'as who swelled the ranks of the urban working class as the rural economy declined. The predominantly Christian leadership also sought to isolate the country from the tensions of the region, turning its back on crises in the Arab world brought about by the Arab–Israeli conflict, although Lebanon still became reluctant host to some 150,000 Palestinian refugees after the 1948 war. The events of 1958, however, demonstrated that it was impossible to keep the world at bay indefinitely.

The crisis of that year was at one level just another indication of the struggle for influence between Lebanese elitist factions, and it was eventually solved in the same way as earlier inter-confessional confrontations – by means of an adjustment of ministerial posts to include groups that had previously been excluded. But, significantly, it reflected growing popular opposition to Maronite ascendancy from mostly Muslim factions which were united in demonstrating the disenchantment of the urban poor at their exclusion from the country's apparent prosperity. The international dimension was also important, as this widespread popular opposition was partly a protest against the government's perceived empathy with Western policies in the region. The Maronite leadership's embrace of the American Eisenhower Doctrine (see Chapter 3) and its opposition to any manifestation of pan-Arabism (as demonstrated by its refusal to join inter-Arab unions, whether with Egypt and Syria or Jordan and Iraq) were interpreted as sympathy for the West. President Nasser's calls for Arab unity struck a popular chord throughout Lebanon, chiefly among the urban masses who resented

and were ashamed of their Christian politicians' attempts to hold Lebanon aloof from the mainstream of Arab politics. Additional popular ferment was engendered by the overthrow of the Hashemite monarchy in Iraq, perceived to be Western-leaning and opposed to Nasser's strident pan-Arabism. The Lebanese army refused or felt unable to put down the disturbances, so it took the despatch of US marines to Beirut at President Sham'un's request to restore order. The crisis was contained, but two new elements in Lebanese politics – the activities of the urban poor and the influence and involvement of external actors actively being enlisted by rival internal factions – would come to threaten the Lebanese political system and eventually lead to its disruption and the destruction of much of Lebanon itself.

With the benefit of hindsight, we can see that the seeds of the Lebanese civil war, which erupted in 1975, were sown in the disturbances of 1958, which had graphically illustrated the depth of the fault lines in Lebanese society. Superficially, Lebanon continued on a path of comparative political freedom and vigorous commercial activity based on the same principles that had guided its development in the immediate post-war years: power sharing between the main religious communities, the deliberate restriction of state control and, as Yapp puts it, 'a tacit concern to set on one side the unresolved conflict about the nature of Lebanon – how much was it Arab and how much distinctively Lebanese'.[13]

Much has been written about the causes of Lebanon's tragic and bloody civil war. Was it mostly an internal phenomenon, another challenge to Maronite dominance by other factions within the Lebanese body politic? Or was it caused primarily by external factors brought about by the presence of Palestinians on Lebanese soil, which sucked Lebanon into the wider Arab–Israeli conflict? Most commentators agree that the fifteen-year confrontation was ignited by the clashes in April 1975 between Christian Phalangist forces and Palestinian fighters in which the mainly Muslim and pan-Arab Lebanese National Movement's supporters weighed in on the side of the Palestinians. This led remorselessly to a general free-for-all, with the collapse of the government, the disintegration of the army and widespread conflict, which had the character of a monolithically (if only superficially accurate) Christian versus Muslim confrontation.

There is no doubt that the presence of the Palestinians in the Lebanon since the 1948 war had been perceived internally as largely disruptive to the stability of the country. The refugee population swelled to some 400,000 and became thoroughly politicized, especially following the arrival in 1971 of the PLO leadership and a large number of fighters after their expulsion from Jordan. But even before that the Lebanese government had been drawn into a confrontation with Israel that it had wished to avoid, as it had been unable to prevent Palestinian commandos using southern Lebanon as

a launch pad for raids into Israel. Indeed, as early as 1969 the Lebanese government had lost control of much of the south of the country to the Palestinian guerrillas. By this time the area was known as 'Fatah Land', where the Palestinians, with the support of much of the Arab world, had set up virtually a state within a state (just as they had tried to do in Jordan). All this invited Israeli retaliation as much against Lebanese as Palestinian targets in a vain attempt to pressurize the Lebanese into controlling the guerrillas' activities, a tactic the Israelis were still using up to the time of their withdrawal from Lebanon twenty-two years later.

The Palestinian dimension, and by extension the dynamics of the Arab–Israel dispute, cast a long shadow within Lebanon and became a major ingredient in exacerbating and prolonging internal conflict, feeding on the inherent instability of Lebanese society with its sectarian fault lines and dysfunctional government. A 'normal' and more 'natural' state could have coped with the Palestinian presence and its external ramifications, but the Lebanese regime, a major section of whose leadership was emotionally divorced from the region and its problems and probably yearned for a return to the cocooned security of a Maronite-dominated 'Little Lebanon', had no answer to forces unleashed by years of sectarian-based misrule and rampant Arab nationalism. Under pressure the Sunni–Maronite consensual partnership fell apart. Indeed, it fell at the first fence, fatally split on the issue of how to deal with the Palestinians, with the Christians looking for a military solution which they could not convince any significant Sunni leader to endorse. This was perhaps unsurprising, given the difficulty of deploying an army with mostly Christian officers and a mainly Muslim rank and file against a movement enjoying considerable popular Muslim support inside and outside the country. All this against the background of probable Syrian military intervention on behalf of Palestinian and local radical pan-Arab and Muslim factions. Predictably, the Lebanese government found itself paralysed by indecision and inhibited by gloomy forebodings of likely obstacles, most of which turned out to be self-fulfilling prophecies as the country disintegrated.

The main features of the civil war make horrific reading.[14] From 1975 onwards, with a few periods of remission and respite, Lebanon was engulfed in an expanding maelstrom of bloodletting and destruction. Inexorably, outside powers – the Syrians, the Israelis, Iran, the West and the UN – were sucked into a quagmire of Lebanese inter-factional turmoil compounded by external intervention. Lebanon became a major battleground within the wider issue of Arab–Israel confrontation. Syria, either through direct military involvement with stationing of troops in the country or via proxy groups such as the Shi'a Amal and various Palestinian militias, pursued its quarrel with Israel. At the same time the presence of several thousand Syrian

regular soldiers increasingly limited the freedom of action of the Lebanese government itself.

The Israelis – via a policy of aggressive retaliation against Palestinian attacks, then partial occupation and eventually, in 1982, full invasion – sought to destroy or neutralize the Palestinians and their radical Arab supporters in southern Lebanon. They were also concerned to neutralize the threat presented by the stationing of Syrian missile batteries and other heavy weapons in the country. This was part of a broader strategy of carrying the fight to their Arab opponents, which included the formal annexation of the Golan Heights, captured from Syria in the 1967 war. With the support of their Christian Phalangist allies, they besieged and bombarded Beirut and forced 140,000 Palestinian refugees to flee from southern Lebanon for the security of the Syrian-controlled Beqaa Valley. One of the most horrific incidents of this time was the massacre in 1982 of about 2,000 non-combatant Palestinians, including women and children, in the refugee camps of Shatila and Sabra by Phalangist militia, unrestrained by their Israeli allies, who had surrounded the camps as part of an anti-'terrorist' search-and-destroy operation.

Eventually, under international pressure, the Israelis partially withdrew from the country, although they maintained their occupation south of the Litani River, which they also tried to protect with their local surrogates – most notably the South Lebanon Army (SLA), a Christian militia which they had trained and armed. (The Israelis were not averse to arming other groups, irrespective of confessional allegiance, as local circumstances permitted, but sometimes they found their arms subsequently used against them.) The SLA were then bogged down in a fierce local war with Druze fighters, which led to southern Lebanon being effectively partitioned between the warring factions. The Palestinians, battered by the Israelis, were themselves factionally divided, and the struggle for control led to more heavy fighting and to the expulsion of the PLO leader Yasser Arafat and 4,000 fighters from Lebanon. Attempts to re-establish a PLO presence in Lebanon were strongly opposed by the Syrians, who used their local allies in Amal against Palestinian supporters of Arafat, adding yet another dimension to the internecine conflict.

With constant inter-factional battling – Christians against Muslims, Sunnis versus Shi'as – the emergence of such ruthless organizations as Islamic Jihad, and the excesses of bloodthirsty militia from all quarters, Lebanon became synonymous with mindless violence, senseless sectarian killing and widespread destruction. The kidnapping of a number of Westerners by radical Islamic groups reinforced the negative image the civil war created in the world media and international opinion. The city and countryside were cantonized. At the height of the civil war Lebanon split into seven separate

areas, each under the local control of one of the militias. In Beirut the 'Green Line' divided the Christians from the Muslims. On both sides of it the capital lay in ruins. The Lebanese army had long ceased to function; commerce was at a standstill; the banking community had fled; and inward investment had dried up. Ceasefires and fine-tuning the confessional balance within the government proved to be short-term and ineffectual palliatives. One episode of multinational military intervention in 1983 by a 6,000-strong US/French/Italian force to try to stabilize the situation following the Israeli withdrawal ended in failure, with heavy American and French casualties. This multinational deployment was perceived by the radical Muslim groups to be one-sided in its support for the Christian-led government. After this bloody rebuff for international peacekeeping it seemed to many in the international community that Lebanon was terminally dysfunctional and probably beyond help.

But by late 1990 the Ta'if peace agreement had led to the end of the internal conflict after the failure of a Pax Syriana to restore order, following fierce fighting between Amal and the Iranian-influenced and -financed Hizballah. Exhaustion and successful Arab mediation were the major factors. Indeed, this was a notable achievement for persistent and imaginative Arab diplomacy, in striking contrast to previous and subsequent attempts to find 'Arab solutions' to other conflicts (the Gulf crisis of 1990 to 1991 was to be a case in point). The contentious continued presence of Syrian forces in Lebanon was taken out of the hands of the Lebanese politicians during these negotiations and put to one side, awaiting agreement between the two governments – but not before several hundred more people had been killed in fighting between the rump of the Lebanese army, led by a Christian general, and Syrian forces stationed in the country. Attempts to replace the Syrians with a multinational Arab force failed because of Syrian opposition. Inter-sectarian face was saved via a Charter of National Conciliation, part of which involved the enlargement of the National Assembly, with seats, for the first time, equally divided between Christians and Muslims. Implementation of the charter proved troublesome and met with principally Christian opposition to what they saw as the further erosion of their privileged positions, but at last the civil war was effectively at an end.

The last decade of the twentieth century was an era of some hope for Lebanon, if not one of unbounded optimism. Stability of a sort was restored and large-scale reconstruction of central Beirut began. By 1992 all the Western hostages had been released, an indication of a return to something like normality in the domestic political scene. The Lebanese–Syrian security treaty of 1991 formalized the position of Syrian troops in Lebanon, and Damascus continued to call important shots in the formulation of Lebanese policy. Lebanon thus enjoyed the security benefits of a Pax Syriana but at

the expense of significant restrictions on its room for manoeuvre. At the start of the new millennium, the success of Hizballah in forcing an Israeli total withdrawal from its self-styled 'security zone', and the rout of its proxy South Lebanon Army, brought temporary peace to the south. And until the Israel assault of 2006 (described below), Lebanon was largely freed from the fear of massive Israeli retaliation for attacks launched by Hizballah, on the pattern of the 1996 Israeli assault on Kana. So for all too short a period there was a prospect of government control being reasserted in an area which had for so long been ruled by militias. The death of President Assad and his son's succession to the Syrian presidency also brought hope of a less one-sided relationship with Damascus. Ordinary Lebanese Muslims, as well as Christians, were increasingly resenting the obtrusive heavy hand of their neighbour, although some of the more radical elements still saw the Syrians as their protectors of last resort. While in the first few years of the new millennium there was no significant decrease in Syrian involvement in Lebanon – some troops were simply redeployed out of the capital and into rural bases – there was a feeling that as the country recovered some of its past economic and political stability it might be able to find a productive *modus vivendi* with its powerful neighbour.

Unfortunately, this optimism was shattered by the assassination of the former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in February 2005. Hariri had resigned the premiership in October 2004, almost certainly (although this was not publicly stated) because of differences with Lebanese President Lahoud over the extent of Syrian influence. This had become major issue in domestic politics since the beginning of the century, with the USA urging the Lebanese to form a new government that was truly representative of the people, composed of strong individuals who had credibility and integrity (in other words, one which would stand up to Damascus). This idea backfired, though, as Hariri's replacement as Prime Minister, Omar Karami, a strong supporter of Damascus, chose a strongly pro-Syrian cabinet, and in November 2004 President Lahoud publicly proclaimed a policy of maintaining close relations with Syria as one of the cornerstones of Lebanese foreign policy. This led to much activity by opposition, anti-Syrian forces, with popular demonstrations both for and against the Syrian connection. In December 2004 a widely based coalition formed the first united platform since the end of the civil war. They called for the resignation of Karami and demanded that Syrian troops redeploy to the border and cease meddling in Lebanese internal affairs. Previously, in September, the international community had once again got involved, with the UN Security Council adopting a US/France-sponsored resolution (No. 1559) calling for the withdrawal of Syrian forces, strict respect for Lebanon's territorial integrity, unity, political independence and free and fair elections without political interference.

Hariri and his supporters were high-profile members of the opposition coalition. His assassination by a car bomb was inevitably blamed on Syria or pro-Syrian Lebanese agents. Several hundred thousand people attended his funeral and popular pressure for a Syrian troop withdrawal grew. However, this was matched by counter-demonstrations urging them to stay. Prime Minister Karami eventually bowed to opposition pressure and suddenly resigned; and, despite mainly Shi'a, Hizballah-backed massive pro-Syrian demonstrations, President Al Assad announced a full Syrian military withdrawal, which was completed in May 2005. UN observers were not able to determine whether Syria had also dismantled its intelligence apparatus within the Lebanon. Subsequently, December 2005, a UN Commission of Inquiry into Hariri's assassination reported that Syrian and Lebanese security and intelligence agencies had been involved in the killing and criticized the Syrian government's slowness in cooperating with the inquiry team. In Lebanon itself a number of further assassinations and attacks were committed, mostly on anti-Syrian personalities (notably Pierre Gemayel, a prominent Christian politician). At mostly US and French instigation, the UN Security Council continued to involve itself in the Syrian–Lebanese question, seeking a normalization of relations leading to recognition by Syria of Lebanon's status as a sovereign, independent state. This would include, for example, the establishment of Syrian and Lebanese embassies in each other's capitals.

The most recent major disaster for a fragile Lebanon was the July 2006 Israeli offensive against Lebanese targets in retaliation for a Hizballah raid into Israel which killed a number of soldiers and kidnapped two. As usual, the Israelis held the Lebanese government responsible for the activities of an organization launching attacks from its territory. The southern border had continued to be tense ever since the Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon, and over the years there had been a number of incidents, including rocket and artillery exchanges. But nobody expected the scale of the July campaign by the Israeli airforce against Lebanon's infrastructure (including the airport, power stations and bridges) and civilian areas in south Beirut and southern Lebanon (Tyre and Sidon especially), where Hizballah had its main strongholds. By the end of the month about 1,000 Lebanese civilians had died and nearly a million were displaced. There were significant Israeli civilian casualties, too, inflicted by Hizballah's long-range rockets. Two thousand three hundred were fired, some well into Israel, in just two weeks, making this the most sustained assault on its territory since the 1948 war. After a series of ground clashes, it was clear that the Israelis would not be able to eliminate their opponents in the difficult terrain of southern Lebanon; nor could they silence the rockets. With neither side able to secure a decisive advantage, the fighting ceased in early August and the UN Security Council

authorized the establishment of a French-led international peacekeeping force, although there remains some uncertainty about its exact mandate, which needs to be agreed between the Israeli and Lebanese governments.

Lebanon is still living with this latest trauma. Despite much talk of reforms, the Lebanese political system is still fundamentally sectarian. Rule by triumvirate reflects a discredited and outmoded formula based on a deliberately fudged assessment of the country's demographic realities. Any new census would undoubtedly show the extent of the numerical superiority of non-Christians. It still endorses and systematizes sectarian division. Cracks are papered over but the basic fault lines remain. Elections, because of gerrymandering and manipulation, are an inaccurate test of public opinion, and not just because of the inflexibility imposed by sectarian straitjackets. The old familiar power-brokers continue to flex their financial muscles, just as they did in the elections of August/September 2000, demonstrating the ability of big business to purchase electoral support. And even if the institutions are made genuinely sound, as Luciani and Salamé have pointed out, 'it must be recognised that the formal existence of democratic institutions in no way guarantees per se that a segmented society will be able to achieve political unity and evolve towards integration'.[15] The fundamental question of whether Lebanon is a legitimate Arab state with a regional role or something different has yet to be settled to the satisfaction of many of its people, especially the Christian minority. The wounds of the savage civil war remain unhealed for many, and by 2007 there were profound fears that a new one might erupt.

The Palestinian refugees are still there, dispossessed, wretchedly poor and unwanted.[16] There has never been an attempt to integrate them into Lebanese society, nor does it seem likely that there will be a serious effort to do so. Their future largely depends on events beyond Lebanese control and the progress of the Middle East peace process. Recent developments can hardly be encouraging. How they and their supporters behave will continue to influence the Israeli attitude to Lebanon. Another connected issue is the future of Hizballah and Amal. Will they be content to act purely as Lebanese political parties? Hizballah, in particular, is riding a tide of popular support due to its successes against the Israelis in the war of 2006. And no wonder: we have seen the effectiveness of its militia. Prolonged stalemate or events elsewhere in the region might induce them to return to a more provocative anti-Israeli policy, using southern Lebanon as their launch pad with or without the consent of the Lebanese authorities.

The long-term Lebanon–Syria relationship is also a hostage to the fortunes of peacemaking. The Syrians are unlikely to have surrendered their ambitions to be a major power-broker in Lebanon and to trust the country to manage its affairs in a way that is not detrimental to Syrian interests: most importantly

to the stability of the Western Levant. This is especially so following the removal of Saddam's regime because Washington has now turned its sights on Damascus and branded Syria a 'sponsor of terrorism'. And while Syria is not officially within the 'axis of evil', the Bush administration has remained stubbornly reluctant either to elicit Damascus's help to extricate itself from the Iraqi morass or to address it as an important player in the Middle East peace process. Syria's alleged continued support for Hizballah remains a bone of contention, just as Iran's does. Any major Iranian/US confrontation, which is ever more possible as a result of Iran's nuclear ambitions, could spill over into further attempts by surrogate parties once again to stir the Lebanese pot. By the spring of 2007 Hizballah and the rest of the predominantly (but not exclusively) Shi'a groups looking to overthrow Prime Minister Fouad Siniora's Western-leaning coalition government had become embroiled in a further round of sectarian tension, with a risk of all-out clashes reigniting civil war. In these circumstances even the very generous sums of aid and massive debt relief pledged by the donor community in January 2007 were no guarantee that war would not break out again in Lebanon.