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Middle East

Lebanon and the Middle East Crisis

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Description:

Unfortunately, according to Gilbert Achcar, the new sectarian divisions in Lebanon look increasingly like the Sunni-Shi'ite divide in Iraq.

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THE PRESS in the US is portraying the opposition movement headed by Hezbollah in Lebanon, that is attempting to challenge the Siniora government, as a movement that is provoking sectarian conflict. What is your take on that? What is the character of the opposition, and what is it trying to achieve?



IT IS already a fact that the whole conflict is increasingly taking on a sectarian character. But it is not the sectarian or religious divide that we were accustomed to in Lebanon's past-I'm referring to the fifteen-year civil war of 1975-90, which mainly pitted a predominantly Christian camp against a predominantly Muslim one-although things were never as pure or as simple as that. The sectarian division this time is taking a form that is unprecedented in Lebanon: it looks more like an extension to Lebanon of the division that prevails in Iraq, opposing the two major branches of Islam, Sunni and Shiite.

The tension between the two communities is indeed quite sharp at present in Lebanon itself. True, neither the opposition nor the so-called majority-they have the parliamentary majority, but they cannot claim to represent the majority of the population-is religiously homogenous. Both involve various groups belonging to different sects and religions. The overwhelming majority of Lebanese Shiites stand in the opposition: they are organized by Hezbollah on the one hand, and Amal on the other hand. They are allied with one of the two major forces among the Christian Maronites, led by former General Michel Aoun. You can add to that a motley collection of various other groups-Christian forces, a minor force among the Druze community and some small Sunni forces, which have mainly in common the fact that they are linked to the Syrian regime.

Facing that in the "majority" camp, there is the Hariri clan, which enjoys a clear majority among Sunni Muslims, plus the majority leadership among the Druze sect, represented by Walid Jumblatt, and a section of the Christians, composed of various groups, among whom the most prominent are the Lebanese Forces, far Right forces that were very vicious during the fifteen-year civil war. Basically, in sectarian terms, the Christians are the only community that is really split in almost two halves. As for the other communities, it is clear that on the one hand, the overwhelming majority of the Shiites stand in the opposition, while the majority of Sunnis and Druze stand in the "majority" camp. The opposition is demanding a larger representation in the government with blocking power (that means one-third of seats according to the constitution), as well as a new electoral law and early elections.

THIS SEEMS like a shift since the Israeli invasion last year. After Hezbollah repulsed the aggression, Hezbollah were the heroes of the hour in Lebanon, and throughout the Middle East. It sounds like what you are saying is that things have shifted back again toward greater division. What accounts for it?

YES, THERE has definitely been a shift, but there were also over optimistic expectations or readings into the situation at that time. During the war, the brutality and the terrible fury of the Israeli onslaught had the effect of more or less unifying the Lebanese people in their condemnation of Israel. But, if one had followed things more closely, it would have been clear that there was no radical shift in the political situation. Quickly after the war, due to the internal political dynamics and the attitude of the various leaderships, the divisions that existed before the Israeli onslaught prevailed again-with even more intensity due to the situation created by the war itself. The political struggle after the war became much more sensitive and much more crucial for everyone. For Hezbollah, the present political confrontation is absolutely vital. The party has been the target of Israel's attempt to destroy it. The attempt failed, but the project has not been discarded.

Washington took over from Israel and is trying to continue the war by other means. It pressed for UN security council resolution 1701, through which it got NATO forces to deploy in southern Lebanon as standby forces to be used in case of domestic confrontation in the country; that is, in order to give a helping hand to Washington's partners. Since then, Washington has been constantly and actively pushing toward civil war in Lebanon. Actually, if one had to summarize Washington's policy toward Lebanon as well as toward Palestine, it could be accurately described as "incitement to civil war": civil war between Palestinians and civil war between Lebanese, not to mention the unfolding civil war in Iraq.

In both Lebanon and Palestine, there is a force that Washington sees as a major enemy-Hamas among Palestinians, Hezbollah in Lebanon. Behind these two forces, Washington targets Iran (Syria, too, but Iran is Washington's main concern). And in both countries there are partners of Washington: the "majority" and the Siniora government in Lebanon, Fatah and Mahmoud Abbas in Palestine.

THAT'S WHY the U.S. and Israel are releasing money to Fatah in Palestine.

EXACTLY. THEY are even sending them weapons. So these are twin situations, and at the same time they are symmetrical, like a reflection in a mirror. In Lebanon, the opposition is fighting against the government (the council of ministers), which is dominated by Washington's partners holding the parliamentary majority, whereas the president (General Emile Lahoud) is in the opposition. In Palestine it is exactly the reverse: The government and parliamentary majority are dominated by Hamas, and the president (Fatah leader Mahmud Abbas) is Washington's partner. In both countries, Washington is pushing for civil war. In the case of Lebanon, it is resorting to the only ideological weapon that the United States and its Arab partners have found to counter Iran's influence in the area-which is sectarianism.

In its effort to shield itself from the U.S. war drive and threats against it, Iran has used pan-Islamic rhetoric; it has been outbidding all Arab regimes in anti-Israeli rhetoric-including provocative stances on the Holocaust. Tehran is also building up a protective shield in the form of a network of alliances going beyond Shiite forces. The Iranian-led alliance is not a "Shiite axis," as it is presented to Sunnis by Washington and its Arab allies. It involves forces that are not Shiite. Hamas is definitely not Shiite-even the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, the largest organization of Sunni Islamic fundamentalism, came out politically in support of Iran. Nor is the Syrian regime a "Shiite regime"-it is actually quite far from Iranian Khomeinist ideology, as it shares the secular ideology of Tehran's previous bitter foe, the Iraqi Baathist regime.

ARE WASHINGTON and its allies using the whole idea of a "Shiite crescent" as an ideological weapon?

IT IS absolutey that. The only tool they have to counter Tehran is to use sectarianism, and denounce Iran and its arc of influence as a "Shiite crescent"-to the point that there were even demonstrations in the Palestinian territories recently, where Fatah demonstrators against Hamas were chanting slogans denouncing Hamas as Shiites, using "Shiites" pejoratively as anti-Semites use "Jews."

WHY IS this having any success?

UNFORTUNATELY, IN the absence of a Left, of class forces, of progressive consciousness-when the dominant forces on both sides are religious forces-it is quite easy to stir up such feelings. If they were facing a class party that crossed sectarian lines, it wouldn't be so easy to counter it with sectarian arguments. But they are facing religious forces, of which the main organization have a sectarian character: Iran and Hezbollah are religious Shiite forces. In such conditions, even though Hamas is part of the alliance, it becomes credible to use the sectarian argument. And this has been very much fueled by the unfolding civil war in Iraq, which is pitting Sunnis against Shiites.

HAS SECTARIAN tension gone up in the wake of the execution of Saddam Hussein?

WASHINGTON'S ARAB partners used it as a further opportunity to whip up the sectarian Sunni versus Shiite division. The execution was conducted very clumsily by the Iraqi government. One gets the impression that Washington actually wanted it to happen that way, knowing that this would be used by its allies in the area to isolate Iran and denounce its influence and its allies. I wouldn't be surprised at all if some U.S. hand was behind the video of Saddam Hussein's hanging-it circulated so quickly and was exploited in such a blatant manner. Suddenly, all kinds of people, many of whom used to hate Saddam Hussein when he was in power, turned him into a martyr of Sunnism. That was quite grotesque!

TO WHAT extent has Hezbollah attempted to act against, or overcome sectarian divisions-or at least project itself as part of a broad opposition? It seems like Hezbollah at least in some respects tries to present itself as part of a broader political opposition. Would you say that there's an element of that, but that it isn't going to succeed because the sectarian logic is too deep?

YES, DEFINITELY. There is an element of that. Hezbollah is keen on not appearing as a purely sectarian force, and trying to enlarge its alliances. That's why they are quite happy to have the alliance with Aoun, who is a major force among Christians; and they try to cozy up to some Sunni forces, including Lebanese Sunni Islamic fundamentalists, and to whatever kind of allies they can find in communities other than the Shiite community. But basically, they are a Shiite organization. In order to be a member of Hezbollah, you have to be a Shiite. It is by nature not only a religious organization, but a sectarian one.

It has built itself in the Shiite community and never bothered in any serious manner to build itself outside it. Its set of priorities is, first, unity among the Shiites-hence, their alliance with Amal, the other major Shiite organization. Then they are keen on avoiding clashes with other Muslims-the Sunnis-because it is neither in their interest, nor in Iran's interest. Hence their conciliatory stances. Inciting sectarianism, actually, is only in the interests of the Saudi, Egyptian, and Jordanian regimes, and of Washington behind them, because that's the only effective ideological tool they've got. And for the reasons mentioned, Hezbollah-although it tries to prevent the situation from deteriorating into sectarianism-is, by its very nature, an easy target for those wanting to whip up sectarianism.

IS THAT why Hezbollah called off the demonstrations in January-for fear of sectarian violence spiraling out of control?

HEZBOLLAH UNDERSTANDS that some of Washington's partners, Jumblatt and the Lebanese Forces in particular, are tools of a strategy that aims at provoking civil war. There is a difference here within the "majority" between the forces just mentioned and the Hariri clan, that is, the Saudi-linked forces: The latter are more "moderate" in the sense that they are more cautious. It's somewhat like the difference you have in Washington between the Bush administration and the Baker-Hamilton "realist" camp. The Saudi rulers are certainly much more in tune with Baker-Hamilton generally than with the present Bush administration. They were very happy with the Bush Sr.

administration, but Bush Jr. is a problem for them because his administration is way too adventurist. They can see how disastrous the Bush administration's balance sheet is for them already.

WHAT IS the role of Syria in all this?

SYRIA IS still very much involved in Lebanon, of course. This is also one of the problems with Hezbollah's strategy: its links with Syria. Most of the forces in the opposition are pro-Syrian forces—all of them actually, except Aoun who used to be Syria's fiercest enemy in Lebanon. Hezbollah is an ally of Syria, there's no mystery about that. Amal is even more closely linked to the Syrian regime. And the other opposition forces too are closely linked to the Syrian regime. One of the purposes of the movement now is to block the international tribunal on Rafik Hariri's assassination (Hariri was killed on February 14, 2005, by a car bomb, and Syrian services are accused of being behind the assassination), which Washington is pushing through the UN in order to use it as a tool to exert blackmail on Damascus. This is one of the obvious purposes of what is going on, and because of that, the Hariri clan is able to tell its social constituency, its sectarian constituency, "Look, these people want to protect the Syrian regime, the murderers of Rafik Hariri. They want to protect the murderers of the great leader of the Sunni community," and so on.

AND THEY want to make Lebanon a protectorate of Syria...

YES, OF course. They use this kind of rhetoric. And unfortunately it is credible because of the fact that major chunks of the opposition are made up of completely rotten pro-Syrian forces. That's a huge problem, quite far from the way some people on the left worldwide have romanticized Hezbollah during the war. Of course, Hezbollah waged a truly heroic resistance. It had fighters really defending their land, their homes, their families, admirably: no discussion about that! But to go beyond and believe that Hezbollah is in a way a left-wing force is not warranted at all in reality.

IN THE press there's been talk of union protests against neoliberal policies and a new agreement in Paris, which is about imposing neoliberal policies in Lebanon. Has Hezbollah attempted to organize resistance around it?

HERE WE come to the issue of the January 25 Paris III meeting. It was a meeting of donors, rich donors, both Western and oil countries, gathered to supposedly help Lebanon. It was called by French president Jacques Chirac, who has been working in very close alliance with Washington on the Lebanese issue since 2004. Chirac is one of the strongest backers of Siniora's government and of the Hariri clan—he used to have very close links with Rafik Hariri. The conference was organized around an economic and social program that is a classical "Washington consensus" program. I'm referring here to the IMF-World Bank standard neoliberal measures that were forced on so many countries during the 1980s and 1990s and are still enforced.

The program of the Siniora government for the Paris III conference is a crude version of that. You name it you get it: privatization, and value added taxes instead of progressive income tax. The plan contains all the classical recipes through which the poorest layers of society are made to bear the brunt of measures that are supposed to lead to a healthier financial equilibrium and enable the government to pay back its debt. Lebanon has accumulated a huge debt over the years (currently over \$40 billion). So this is on the one hand a classic IMF-World Bank kind of program. On the other hand, this conference was a political tool. It was meant by Chirac, and with him Bush, as a way of giving strong support to the Siniora government and the "majority" in Lebanon.

The way the opposition dealt with this development is very telling. Various forces of the opposition—Hezbollah, Aoun—criticized the program of the Paris III conference, but quite moderately in fact. They criticized the government's program, as any parliamentary opposition would do, but without rejecting its core logic. And then you had the leadership of the unions' confederation calling for a mobilization against the governmental program. This leadership

is actually closely linked to the opposition and to Syria: it is a product of the period of Syrian domination over the country.

The demonstration called by the confederation on January 9 against the Paris III agenda proved completely ridiculous-2,000 people, in a country now used to demonstrations of hundreds of thousands of people. That's because the opposition did not mobilize in any serious manner. Although they proclaimed their support, they did not actually mobilize, for the obvious reason that fighting neoliberalism is definitely not their real concern. They actually explained that they did not want to jeopardize the Paris conference!

IT SEEMS that one way you could cut across the sectarian divide would be through political and union organizations that posed a non-sectarian alternative based on resisting these neoliberal policies.

THAT'S EXACTLY the point. You've got people trying to do that, fortunately. That's what the Lebanese Communist Party (LCP) is trying to do. The LCP did not participate in the sit-in of the opposition since it started in downtown Beirut last December. They stood out of it, stating that they don't share the opposition's views, which are aimed at cutting a deal with the majority. The communists said, "That's not our program, we don't think the way out in Lebanon will come through a deal between sectarian leaderships. What we are ready to fight for together with the opposition are democratic demands-a new electoral law, new elections. But we don't want to be involved in a fight for a deal between sectarian forces that would end up forming a joint government." And then, when it came to opposition to Paris III, the LCP refused to participate in the day of demonstration called by the union confederation and supported by the opposition because, they said, it was not credible. They decided to organize their own demonstration, but the deterioration of the situation obliged them to cancel it.

THE SECTARIAN clashes in Beirut?

YES, INDEED. So the Lebanese Communist Party is trying to stand outside the two camps and constitute a third force on the basis of a left-wing program. They've been doing so from the beginning of the period that started after the assassination of Rafik Hariri in 2005, when you had the two demonstrations in March, one by Hezbollah and the other by what is now called the "majority," or the "March 14 coalition." The LCP did not take part in either of the two demonstrations, and called for a third one on another day-with a few thousand marchers.

It was not much compared to the huge half-million demonstrations that you had from the two major camps. But, still, it was not completely negligible to have a few thousand people demonstrating with red flags and slogans devoid of any sectarian character-progressive slogans. In the recent war, the Lebanese CP did not stay neutral, of course. It took part in the mobilization and fighting against the Israeli aggression, in alliance with Hezbollah-an alliance without subordination, as the CP's general secretary put it. It was an alliance from an independent position against Israel, but not an alliance around the goal of forming a joint venture of sectarian forces for a new government; the latter is not the CP's program.

BECAUSE OF the sectarian set-up of the Lebanese political system, can one say that it's not possible to negotiate deals that don't involve an acceptance of that set-up?

WHAT IS possible is to wage a campaign that is based on democratic slogans, such as a new electoral law and new elections. The existing electoral law was designed by the Syrian authorities, it distorts the representation of various forces. Originally, it was mainly meant to under-represent the force of Aoun's supporters, when the latter was the fiercest enemy of the Syrian presence in Lebanon. That's why the first thing Aoun demanded-after he came back from exile when Syrian troops went out-was a change in the electoral law. But Washington's partners refused to grant him that, and went to the elections in a coalition with Hezbollah and Amal.

One shouldn't forget that it is Hezbollah that brought this majority to power. Aoun got completely ostracized in the 2005 elections by Washington's partners, although his role had been very active against the Syrian forces. So he moved into the opposition and, a few months later, he went into an alliance with Hezbollah. His ambition is very clearly to become president. (By the electoral rules in Lebanon, the president is a Maronite Christian, and Aoun is a Maronite.) Aoun thought that the best way to fulfill his ambition was to cut a deal with Hezbollah, given the huge electoral force they represent as the largest force within the largest community in Lebanon.

OF THE CP or any other secular Left forces, are there any that put forward demands to completely rejig the system so it's no longer based on sectarian identification and parties?

IN FACT, the idea that the institutions should be transformed so as to get rid of the sectarian distribution of seats and power was agreed upon by the consensus of the Lebanese establishment when the civil war ended in the years 1989-90. A conference of Lebanese representatives was held in Saudi Arabia, and they agreed on an agenda for political reform, the Taif Agreement. Officially, everybody in Lebanon stands for that, but that's purely formal.

Some people however are more serious about changing the political system, like Aoun for instance. Hezbollah are officially for it, but given that they are very much a sectarian force, they are torn between their sectarian character, which fits into the sectarian system, and the fact that since the Shiites are the largest minority, they therefore stand to gain from a system in which you don't have a predefined sectarian distribution of seats and power-where the distribution is settled instead through elections and parliamentary deals. So, you see the situation is ambiguous. As a matter of fact, it is the Left, the communists who are most energetically dedicated to a secularization of the country, beyond the mere abolition of "political sectarianism."

WHAT ARE the origins of sectarian-based politics in Lebanon? Can it be traced back to the French Occupation?

IT WOULD be too reductive to say that. Sectarian conflict has its origins in Ottoman Empire-ruled Mount Lebanon in the nineteenth century. Before you had Lebanon in its present borders, you had a sectarian division between the two major communities in Mount Lebanon, which were the Maronites and the Druze. These were two minorities in a region under Sunni Muslim domination. They coexisted in peace for a very long time. But it was in the nineteenth century that the first sectarian war broke out in Lebanon, coming in the wake-and this is interesting-of a peasant uprising against feudal landlords that took place in 1858.

The peasant uprising, which started among Maronite peasants and threatened to spread to the whole peasantry, was channeled into a religious conflict between Maronites and Druze. The horizontal division between sects replaced the vertical one between peasants and landlords. This led to the French landing in Lebanon, as Napoleon III sent his fleet in 1860 to "protect" the Maronite Catholics. Thus, a historical pattern emerged in the nineteenth century whereby sectarian divisions were used to prevent other political and social dynamics, and exploited by foreign powers in order to control the country.

DIDN'T THE French aid in the establishment of the political system based on sectarian divisions?

THE FRENCH came back only after the First World War, with a colonial mandate from the League of Nations. When the French settled in Lebanon as a colonial power, they defined Lebanon's present borders, enlarging them so that they had a larger and more precarious mixture of sectarian communities, and they designed institutions based on a sectarian distribution of power according to the classical recipe of "divide and rule." And that was indeed the origin of the present Lebanese institutions.

YOU'VE TALKED about a strategy by Washington and its allies in the region to foment civil wars. You also talk about the U.S. trying to isolate Iran. Combine this with the fact that the U.S. is sending more naval forces to the Gulf and with the "surge" in Iraq, which seems to be connected with a plan to go after the Mahdi Army, or sections of it-is this part of a coordinated strategy? Is there any possibility, in your view, that this might be some kind of a prelude to a limited military action against Iran? How would you fit all these things together in terms of U.S. policy?

IF YOU try to think of U.S. imperial interests in any kind of rational manner, you would exclude it. But the problem is that you've got an administration in Washington that doesn't respond to any rational standards. It's one of the most irrational teams ever found at the head of the U.S. Empire in its history. These people are crazy enough to really consider attacking Iran, all the more that they are in dire straights, stuck in a quagmire in Iraq. Like a wounded beast getting nastier, they are in such a bad political position, losing ground so rapidly, that they might very well be tempted into some kind of poker-like gamble-double or nothing.

IT DOES seem almost to be a plan of rule or ruin. Iraq is going badly-just blow the whole thing up.

THAT'S WHAT they call the "surge," isn't it? I guess that, for the time being, the countervailing forces within the establishment-all the old "realists," the likes of Baker-Hamilton who represent a bipartisan, more rational imperialist consensus-are holding that back. But the Bush administration-and the remnants of the neoconservative circles around the administration-are obviously tempted to try what is actually the equivalent of accelerating a car into a massive roadblock.

IT'S NOT a perfect analogy, but remember how after the Tet Offensive, when a majority turned against the war and it was clear that it was unwinnable, the U.S. actually spread the war into Laos and Cambodia.

YES, OF course. And then, after that, Nixon-Kissinger drew the lessons of the situation and basically thought, "We're losing ground, we're stuck in a quagmire. Let's talk to the sponsors of the Vietnamese resistance, the Soviets and the Chinese." That's indeed what they did, and they then disentangled from Vietnam. And that's what the Baker-Hamilton proposal is about, actually-"Let's talk to Syria and Iran." But the Bush administration doesn't want to hear about it, because that would contradict every bit of doctrinal views they've been putting forward at least since 9/11, not to mention the views expressed by the neocons long before Bush came to power.

THE ELECTIONS here were a clear message. Even though the only other choice was to vote for Democrats who are supporters of American imperialism-it was clearly a vote against the U.S. in Iraq. And here it looks like it may lead to a revival of the antiwar movement, which has been pretty dormant. Is there any sense where you are, in Europe, for example, of the developments here reigniting organized opposition to the war?

THE ELECTORAL defeat of the Bushies has emboldened the opposition to their policies, of course. The important thing, as you say, is not who won the election, but who lost it. The fact that this administration is reacting as if no election had been held, and as if it had not been defeated, just being stubborn and sticking to its own line and rejecting the majority bipartisan consensus of the U.S. imperialist establishment-this way of behaving is isolating this administration even among the U.S. ruling class itself. Thus, there is now definitely a new space opening up for the antiwar movement, which is probably the largest political space you've had since Vietnam. Not since Vietnam have you had such a sharp division within the ruling class, with the executive so isolated, and such a mounting opposition to the escalation. So, yes, this is a great moment for the antiwar movement to put all its forces into the balance.

This interview by Paul D'Amato first appeared in [International Socialist Review](#) (US).