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Lebanon's Precarious Neutrality



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Facing possible invasion from both Britain and Germany in 1940 and determined to remain neutral, the Irish government in Dublin asked one of its senior ministers to draft a memorandum on how to stay out of the Second World War. “Neutrality is a form of limited warfare,” was his eloquent but bleak response.

The Lebanese would agree. For seven years, they have been pleading and praying and parleying to stay out of the Syrian war nextdoor, to ignore Israel’s threats, Syria’s sisterly

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embrace, America's warnings, Russia's entreaties and Iran's blandishments. I guess you have to be an especially gifted people to smile obligingly – ingratiatingly, simplistically, bravely, grovellingly, wearily – at all around you and get away with it.

“When Lebanon is without a government for a month, you know the Lebanese are to blame,” a friend announced to me over coffee in Beirut this week. “When Lebanon is without a government for three months, you know foreigners are involved.” Armies have clanked through Lebanon for thousands of years, of course, but its current suitors are arriving with almost daily frequency. The Lebanese are being embraced by the newly victorious Syria, threatened by Israel, warned by the Americans, cuddled by the Russians and vouchsafed eternal love by the Iranians who pay and arm the Lebanese Hezbollah militia. And all this with an \$80bn national debt, 1.5 million Syrian refugees, and electricity cuts – every day, without exception – since 1975.

It's a lesson in how to be small, stay safe and live in fear. The caretaker cabinet of Saad Hariri – in effect, the pre-election Lebanese government and the next government rolled into one, each minister chosen under the country's tiresome Muslim-Christian system of sectarianism – has adopted a policy of “dissociation” from regional conflicts. “Dissociation” is a version of neutrality, in which almost everyone from the Americans to the Iranians and the EU pretends that Lebanon is united in mutual love, and of far more use intact than destroyed in a rerun of the 1975-1990 civil war. The EU, of course, is lavishing money on the bankrupt Lebanese patient because it doesn't want even more refugees pouring into Europe.

In fact Lebanon's neutrality also protects it from itself. The Sunnis receive massive funding from the Saudis, who loathe the Iranians, Hezbollah and the Lebanese Shias who support them. The Sunni Lebanese prime minister Saad Hariri loves the Saudis – or rather, has to love the Saudis, since they support his premiership and because he holds Saudi citizenship and the Saudis believe he will do their bidding. Readers may remember the gentlemanly kidnapping of Hariri in Riyadh last year and his ghostly reappearance before Saudi television to “resign” his Lebanese premiership until president Macron rescued him from the clutches of crown prince Mohammad bin Salman, and spirited him to Paris where he mysteriously resumed his Lebanese premiership. Hariri, being an eclectic passport holder, is also a French citizen.

The Lebanese Christians, as always, are divided – President Michel Aoun remains a pal of Assad, the rest fear another Syrian “intervention” in Lebanon – while Hezbollah says that if Israel strikes Iran, the war between Shia militias and Israel will restart in southern

Lebanon. Israel regularly threatens Hezbollah – to Hezbollah’s delight – and Lebanon. Walid Jumblatt’s Druze still await the destruction of Assad. Try explaining all that to Donald Trump. After all, it’s only a year ago that the dotty US president praised Hariri for being “in the front line of the fight against Hezbollah” – haplessly unaware that poor old Hariri sits next to Hezbollah’s ministers in the Lebanese cabinet.

The Americans (and the Saudis) therefore maintain their constant and useless exhortation to Lebanon that the Shia Hezbollah must be disarmed/disbanded/merged with the Lebanese army – since they are armed by Iran (the font of all evil), the enemy of Israel (the font of all goodness) and the ally of Syria (whose leader the Americans still theoretically want to dethrone as the font of all chemical warfare) – while sending arms to the Lebanese army. Besides, no Lebanese soldier – least of all a Shia – is going to attack his Shia brothers and sisters in south Lebanon for the benefit of the Americans, Saudis or Israelis.

So American support keeps coming, up to a point; just two months ago, Lebanese army commander general Joseph Aoun was in Washington to discuss “counter-terrorism cooperation” – only months after his soldiers and Hezbollah (‘terrorists’, according to the US State Department) had together helped to drive Islamists out of the Ersal pocket in north-eastern Lebanon. The Americans gave the Lebanese army four A-29 Super Tucano light-attack aircraft, powerful enough to shoot up Isis, weak enough to be of no threat to Israel. US military aid to Lebanon stands at a slightly measly \$70m a year – compare it to \$47bn over 40 years to the Egyptian military, which cannot even suppress the current Isis uprising in Sinai. And US weapons will cease to arrive in Beirut, the Americans have made perfectly clear, the moment the Lebanese are tempted by Iranian offers.

The Iranians, with their crashing rial economy, have been offering Beirut even more cash – from where, exactly, we don’t know – than the Americans, along with guns, agricultural and industrial assistance. After Iran’s new military and defence agreements with Syria, and the “productive role” it will play in Syria’s post-war reconstruction – the words of Iranian defence minister Amir Hatami – not to mention the rebuilding of Syrian military installations, airbases, schools, hospitals (comparatively speaking, this list is of Marshall Plan proportions) there must surely be a merging of funds and fantasy. You wouldn’t think that Iran’s minister of economy had been dismissed this week. The Russians, needless to say, want their stake in the reconstruction of Syria – so do the Lebanese, one might add – but in Lebanon the Russians have a team offering to take tens of thousands of Syrian refugees home under guarantees of safety.

This is good news for President Aoun and his foreign minister Gebran Bassil (who happens to be Aoun's son-in-law), who want to get rid of the Syrian refugee camps across Lebanon and help to restore "normalisation" to Syria. But there were lots of objections from the Europeans and the UN, who'll have to get involved and want to make sure the refugees don't get slapped into prison the moment they cross the border and more than anything want to avoid the "normalisation" of post-war Syria under Assad.

The Syrians, meanwhile, want to resume their formerly "sisterly" relations with Lebanon and are impatient when the Lebanese – especially Hariri – resist. Syria, with massive power cuts of its own, is already offering electricity to Lebanon, and the Lebanese were delighted to hear that the Syrian government had just retaken control of the Syrian-Jordanian frontier post at Nassib. This would surely reopen the only land transit passage for Lebanese exports to Jordan and the Gulf.

But there was a catch. Syria's ambassador to Beirut, Ali Abdul Karim Ali, made a suitably Baathist remark this week. "Enemies are now looking for ways to put their pride aside, so" – and here he was referring to Lebanon – "what about the brotherly country whose land borders are all with Syria, in addition to occupied Palestine?" For Palestine, read Israel. And, Ali added, "Syria of course needs Lebanon, but Lebanon needs it more." Then came reports – unconfirmed but distressing for Hariri's pro-Saudi camp – that while returning refugees could cross the Nassib border post, it was not yet open to Lebanese lorries carrying the country's fruit and vegetable exports. "Blackmail," roared Hariri. Even more galling for the Lebanese was a photograph showing Russian military police as well as Syrian troops at the Nassib border.

So if Lebanon needs Syria more than Syria needs Lebanon, I suppose that Lebanon needs America more than America needs Lebanon – but Iran needs Lebanon more than Lebanon needs Iran. And the Saudis need Lebanon, because they can use Hariri as the figurehead of Sunnism against the Shia Hezbollah/Syrian axis and thus damage Shia Iran. And the Lebanese, with their \$80bn debt – a result of the policies, ironically, of Hariri's murdered father Rafiq – need the Saudis. The Russians? Surely, with their fleet sailing the billows off the Syrian coastal city of Tartus, they need no one. Perhaps that Irish minister – Frank Aiken, veteran of the Irish war of independence and the Irish civil war – was right in 1940. Neutrality is a form of limited warfare.