



FOR A NEUTRAL LEBANON BY ROGER EDDE

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For some time now, it has been increasingly clear that any further progress in the peace process in the Middle East is irreversibly tied to a stable and lasting resolution of the question of Lebanon. In turn, the resolution of this question depends on the re-establishment of a Lebanese sovereignty that was, many years ago, literally stolen from the Lebanese people by foreign forces.

All too conveniently the absence of a strong central government in Beirut has been explained as the logical outcome of a fragmented nation embroiled in an impossible civil war involving its many religious and political factions. Such an analysis has overlooked the interest of non-Lebanese forces in encouraging and providing arms for such conflicts in order to justify their own presence and their respective designs in and over Lebanon. Far from causing an irreversible dismemberment of that unfortunate country, the holocaust of the past seven years has strengthened the resolve of the various Lebanese communities to survive as one people within the inviolable boundaries of a democratic and multi-denominational state.

Beyond the daily headlines, a first imperative in the negotiations on Lebanon is therefore to break away from the false and self-serving assumption that Lebanon is hopelessly divided within itself. A strong leadership in Beirut does not require a violent leader nor does it entail the need for a repressive army. These can only lead to further divisions and bring about a state of semi-permanent civil war. Instead, a strong leadership for Lebanon means a leader who enjoys the confidence of all the communities that comprise the country.

A second imperative in these negotiations is to move away from short-term solutions, and act boldly and quickly toward more radical alternatives which provide security for all states in the region while insuring the unity and sovereignty of Lebanon itself. Such objectives would be met most effectively if Lebanon were to be made a permanently neutral and disarmed state.

Neutrality for Lebanon is a realism of last resort. Not so much the result of a new wisdom as the consequence of evident failure, it is a policy dictated by the country's historical fact, its geographical situation and its political tradition.

The historical fact of Lebanon is such that alignment abroad risks disintegration at home. Only the neutralization and the disarmament of the country would put an end to the tangle of terrorism and violence which has already produced too many innocent victims.

Placed at the geographical heart of a region in a state of war since 1948, Lebanon - which signed an armistice agreement with Israel that formally recognized the existing boundaries between the two countries - could, with neutrality and disarmament, escape the cycle of international conflicts of which it has been made a pawn over the past many years.

And finally, once disarmed and neutral, Lebanon could once again become an example for the whole region of political democracy, cultural pluralism and peaceful coexistence among its many spiritual communities.

While postwar precedents for such solutions to the predicament of states placed in a buffer area do not abound, they do exist. Thus, in 1955 - with the approval of the Soviet Union and in the space of only a few weeks - Austria escaped the East-West conflict in Central Europe by committing itself to permanent neutrality when it signed the peace treaty that put a formal end to its part in World War II. Unlike such practitioners of armed neutrality as Sweden and Switzerland, Austria was left only with a small army whose sole function was to maintain order within the country. Austria nevertheless preserved institutions and sympathies that have kept it clearly on the side of the West.

Such are the aspirations of today's Lebanon which, like yesterday's Austria, has not been declared a belligerent state in the wars which have brought the Middle East to its current state of turmoil.

In short, a permanently neutral and disarmed Lebanon would require:

1. The total departure of all foreign forces now in the country, and the complete disarmament of all paramilitary groups now within the internationally recognized boundaries of Lebanon; a restructured Lebanese Army would be left with the role of an effective national police force.
2. The guarantee of the Great Powers, and the establishment on its soil of a multinational force, acceptable to all concerned parties.
3. The enforcement of true democratic procedures which, at last freed from the pressures exerted by foreign and local armed forces and factions, would permit the election of a credible Lebanese leadership for a united free Lebanon.

Roger Edde , a Lebanese lawyer, is the founding president of the Neutral Lebanon Movement he has been in Washington on consultations.