

LEBANON: "BIRTH PANGS OF A NEW MIDDLE EAST"?

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Could the conflict in Lebanon last as long as the 100-year war between the English and the French in the Middle Ages (the actual figure is 116)?

When we first covered this chapter of history in high school, we were all skeptical and thought historians had the particulars confused. I have to admit that since then I have come to believe that such a thing has really happened and moreover that it might be happening again and in my own lifetime, namely the conflict in the Middle East, specifically the one in Lebanon.

Far from attempting to draw parallels between the two conflicts or to list an inventory of the history of the conflict in the region, the recent foremost concern giving rise to the present deliberation on Lebanon is the repercussions instigated by the presumed indictments of the United Nation's Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL) of the alleged assassins behind the 2005 killing of former Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri. Furthermore, now, with the indictments already delivered to the pre-trial judge, Lebanon is in a state of panic as the country speculates about what reverberations the supposed hunt for justice will have on the country.

The Lebanese people have no misgivings about the underlying reasons purporting an international tribunal in bringing selective justice to Lebanon. In fact, even before the collapse of the government, the unity government had done little other than discuss the STL and its boomerang effects. At the same time, Lebanese citizens have watched food and fuel prices skyrocket.

The people of Lebanon are not oblivious of the fact that since 1975, the onset of the latest round of conflicts in Lebanon, many of the culprits responsible for the deaths of politicians such as Kamal Jumblatt, Tony Frangieh, Salim Lawzi, Riyad Taha, Bashir Gemayel, Rashid Karami, Hasan Khaled, Nazem el Qadri, René Moawad, Dany Chamoun, Elie Hobeika, Basil Fuleihan, Samir Kassir, George Hawi, Gebran Tueni, Pierre Gemayel, Walid Eido, Antoine Ghanem, François al-Hajj, Wissam Eid, Imad Moghanyah and hundreds of thousands of civilians have almost all gone unpunished for their acts.

Increasingly Lebanese TV stations are broadcasting interviews with people advocating coexistence among the 19 different sects in Lebanon. At the same time, though, the Labor Minister was defending a new real estate bill that calls for banning the sale of land between various sects for 15 years, alleging that it will guarantee coexistence.

For the Armenian community in Lebanon, the ever-increasing role of Turkey as a mediator poses enormous worries. However, they are not alone in raising concerns and doubts about the authenticity of the recent turbulent relations between Turkey and Israel. Many Lebanese politicians voiced their protest and resentment of the placement of a huge poster of Erdogan at the Martyrs' Square in Beirut last November, the very place where many Lebanese nationalists were hanged by the Ottomans during WWI.

Listening to the Saudi Foreign Minister declare that the present situation was dangerous and that it could lead to the division of Lebanon, and Ahmadinejad's warning to Israel, the US and some European nations that their "nasty, plotting hands" will be chopped, the question the ordinary Lebanese citizen is asking is this: What is our fate at this specific moment in time when the whole region seems to be going through what once Condoleezza Rice called "birth pangs of a new Middle East"?

The Lebanese public is convinced that Saudi, Iranian, Turkish, Syrian, and US meddling in Lebanese affairs is no coincidence. For them, the Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia, the protests in Algeria, Yemen, Morocco, and Jordan, escalating violence in Iraq and Egypt, especially against Christians, the partition of Sudan, Iran's nuclear program, the deadlocked Arab-Israeli talks and the sectarian strife in Lebanon are pieces of the same jigsaw puzzle external powers are bent on reshuffling at the expense of the indigenous peoples' lives and livelihoods.

With politicians engaged in a war of words coupled with external interfering in the country, the Lebanese are now bracing themselves for what could be a long political crisis that could easily get out of control.