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WHAT'S BEHIND THE CONFLICT IN LEBANON?

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Present-day tensions and fighting in the biblical land of cedars have their origins centuries ago

Lebanon is the Phoenicia of Bible times. It is in fact a majestic sprawling mountain at the eastern end of the Mediterranean. Its slopes used to be thickly wooded with cedar trees (the biblical cedars of Lebanon). Time has stripped them almost bare, but a few famous groves remain. The slopes of the mountain now are dotted with villages, for it is in the recesses of Mount Lebanon that the early Christians established themselves. And until modern warfare, there was safety in those heights.
Heights.

Most of the inhabitants of Phoenicia embraced Christianity during the early centuries of the Christian era. It is sad that in those centuries the church lost its missionary calling. The Byzantine (or Eastern Roman) Empire ruled Lebanon, as well as neighboring regions, and persecuted those who did not adhere to official orthodox creeds. The nonconformists, among them the Maronites, found refuge in the villages of Mount Lebanon. They formed a distinct ethnic group, known as Lebanese Christians.

That is the picture at the time of the rise of Islam in the seventh century. When country after country was succumbing to this new forceful religion, when Christianity was disappearing completely from north Africa--the home of Augustine and location of many flourishing churches--when the great Islamic empire was stretching itself from Spain to China, it is historical fact that the Christians of Mount Lebanon never succumbed.

The Maronites of Lebanon remained free, retaining even the spoken Aramaic, the common language of the Middle East in the days of Christ. They remained as an island of unconquered people in a sea of Islam.
Islam.

The Crusader wars brought these Maronite Christians into contact with Western Christendom. In the Middle Ages they accepted the pope as the vicar of

Christ, and submitted to the ecumenical creeds of Christianity. Rome made some concessions. They were allowed to keep their Aramaic liturgy and their traditions, which included the right for priests to marry.

At the beginning of the sixteenth century the Ottoman Turks conquered this whole area and Syria-Lebanon remained under their domination for the next 400 years. This was a long and dark period in their history, and it was during this period that the cedar trees were ravished. But the human suffering was more terrible. In the 1860s there were such massacres of the Christians in Lebanon that the Western world took notice. European powers wanted to step in and protect the Christians of Lebanon. They began to demand a special status for the land. But nothing really happened until the fall of the Turkish Empire in 1918. Then a new and free Lebanon emerged and flourished for the next 50 years.

Modern Lebanon was styled after the republic of France. The Christians were favored and regarded as the major ethnic group. An attempt was made to balance the power and give each group their rights. The president was always to be a Christian Maronite, the prime minister a Sunni Muslim and the speaker of the house a Shiite Muslim. The deputies were to be elected as representatives of all the ethnic and religious groups in the country. The Protestants came out of this with the right to one seat in the 99-seat House of Parliament. All this took place in the early 1920s. For 25 years there followed halcyon days. Beirut grew as a haven for refugees. West and East met in Beirut.

Suddenly, in 1948, the state of Israel was born. This event was to have drastic repercussions. It signaled the beginning of violent Arab-Israeli confrontations and of coups and revolutions within the Arab world. Old dynasties disappeared and "progressive" regimes appeared. Lebanon had a short-lived civil war in Lebanon but President Eisenhower reacted quickly and dispatched U.S. Marines. The country settled back into a few more years of peace and prosperity, but with a difference. There were ominous clouds on her horizon. She now harbored within her borders (as did Syria and Jordan) Palestinian refugees who, unlike all other refugees, were not assimilated but were unwisely kept in deplorable camps as an object lesson to the rest of the world: "See what you have done."

As various guerrilla groups grew up out of these camps, and as the world was shocked time and again by terrorist tactics, it became obvious that Lebanon's freedom had been misused. Guerrilla headquarters in Beirut blatantly took credit for their actions and radical Beirut papers praised them. The storm was gathering again for the Christians, who sensed that they were now outnumbered. Radical Palestinians, plus leftist Muslims, tipped the balance.

Prior to April 1975, there was a mounting tension. Three factors were working together: the Muslim, the Palestinian and the International Left. In the 1970s, if you could read Arabic and walked into one of Beirut's many bookstores,

you would have been shocked by the books, magazines, posters and slogans that you saw. They would have told you that something serious was brewing. Here was propaganda that meant business--words on the rampage.

So much for freedom when it is misused. Nowhere else in the Arab world was there so much of it. There was freedom and there were jobs in Lebanon. Hundreds of Syrians found laboring jobs in Beirut which paid them far more than they could get at home.

Unfortunately, most of the Muslims of Lebanon considered themselves to be Arabs first and Lebanese second. They did not appreciate the non-involvement of the Lebanese army in the Arab-Israeli conflicts of 1956, 1967 and 1973. This was perhaps one reason why they used their newspapers to loudly proclaim their support for each commando raid on Israel.

Lebanon the beautiful--we have lost you, and as Christians we should and must mourn with you.

The more than 300,000 Palestinians living in Lebanon, like the Muslims, enjoyed freedoms not granted to other Palestinians in neighboring Arab countries. Taking advantage of it, they formed a state within a state and increased their raids against Israel. The delicate balance became thinner and more strained as resentments grew daily on both sides.

The Christian Lebanese resented being host to the Fedayeen--the guerillas. They feared the signs they saw of Marxists, Maoists, Arab leftists and anarchists, all openly setting up headquarters in Beirut. They saw the slogans that were splashed boldly on the sides of buildings and walls. There was hardly a liberation movement in the third world that didn't have its representative in Lebanon.

Looking back, then, we see that the Christian Lebanese do not fit the category of "Arab." We see them rather as the oldest inhabitants, the mountain-dwellers of Lebanon. Here in the United States we have only a few hundred years of history to relate to and we are not very historically conscious. The opposite is true for the people of the Middle East, especially when their history has been mixed with suffering. These mountain people could easily have been a remnant of the early church. It was around Antioch that the name *Christian* was first used. And those Christian villagers in southern Lebanon, where their villages have been Christian since earliest times, could date from apostolic times.

The Maronite church in Lebanon is rich, powerful and very visible. Shrines, monasteries and enormous new and old churches are to be seen everywhere. Long before this war broke out the Maronites had many private armies. They were prepared to defend themselves. History had taught them that lesson.

But what has happened has been ugly and frightening. The Lebanon we knew is no more. The death toll, when you consider the size of her population, is phenomenal. The stories of atrocities on both sides are enough to embitter and poison the lives of all those who have survived. One can scarcely look far enough ahead to see any hope for healing after so much acute suffering. Lebanon the beautiful, Lebanon the refuge, Lebanon the host, the Switzerland of the Middle East--we have lost you, and as Christians we should and must mourn with you.

By our silence we have increased the struggle. Probably no other people in this world have had as much contact with Lebanon as have the Americans. Where else did we build and maintain an American university like the one in Beirut? Some day a poignant book may be written of the heroic struggle of the staff and students to maintain their university and her high standards, to keep it functioning just a few yards from shells and bombs and not without casualties.

Where was the Bible translated into Arabic? It was done by Americans within the grounds of the Nationalist Evangelical Church, now completely destroyed. Where in the Middle East did people travel weary miles to find healing but to the hospital of the American University? And now that hospital has gone through indescribable months of trauma as it ministered to the shattered and wounded, often at gunpoint.

The Christians of Lebanon are not blameless and their style of war has been sickening. But it is important to recognize that for them this was a defensive war. Either they won or they would lost everything.

In the end it is only the gospel that holds out hope for the Middle East.
