



## PERSPECTIVES

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### Lebanon's Lessons for Israel

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** True to form, liberals are hopeful that the Beirut explosion, Macron's visit to Lebanon, and the youthful demonstrations against the country's Hezbollah-dominated government herald a new popular unity and a better day for all Lebanese citizens. Neither past nor present suggests that such a happy outcome is likely.

How many Lebanons are there?

This has been a question ever since the French Mandate in 1920. It was repeatedly raised after Lebanon's independence in 1943, and came to the fore once again after last week's explosion at Beirut's port.

The question did not arise in the first hours after the explosion, as the Lebanese people weighed and grieved the terrible extent of their losses. It emerged in full force a little bit later, during the visit of French president Emmanuel Macron—the first, and indeed only, head of state ever to visit the beleaguered country.

In the Christian area of Beirut, which suffered the brunt of the explosion, Macron was greeted by chants in French: "Macron save us!" and "You are our only hope!" Few Lebanese Shiites and only a few more Lebanese Sunnis know French, and many members of both sects—even those who chafe under the Hezbollah-dominated government—don't identify with those sentiments.

Even less do they identify with one of the most frequently viewed scenes of Macron's visit—his warm embrace of a young Lebanese woman during his tour of the area. Most Lebanese Shiite and Sunni women, like their fellow womenfolk in the Muslim world, do not embrace men except for close family, and even then they do so only rarely, whatever the circumstances. This rule is not bent even for illustrious foreign leaders.

No Arab politician—not even a member of the local Communist party, which is fiercely committed to gender equality—would ever dare to do anything more than shake a woman’s hand, and even then he would only do so reluctantly. Arguably the most popular leader in recent Arab history, the “progressive” and nationalist Gamal Abdel Nasser, never appeared in public with his wife, a cue picked up on by the present Egyptian president. Sisi’s wife rarely appears with her husband in public, and when she does, she wears a religious scarf on her head and a dress that conforms strictly to Islamic law. Sisi has appeared with her in public for the sole purpose of driving home the point that he is as good—or even better—a Muslim than members of the Muslim Brotherhood, which he ruthlessly suppresses.

The same can be said of Sisi’s nemesis, Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. When he makes public appearances with his wife, she is always garbed in appropriate Islamic dress and the couple always maintains a respectable distance. This was true even before coronavirus.

Macron’s visit and behavior bring into relief once again that both politically and culturally, after 77 years of independence, the state of Lebanon is fractured. There is a Lebanon that is part of the Muslim Arab hinterland and plays by its rules, which—no matter what Western liberals might hope—change at a snail’s pace if they change at all. There is also a Christian, mostly Maronite beachhead on the Mediterranean that is linked to France.

This was true in 1958, when “progressive” Nasser, the darling of the Western left, activated Sunni politicians and movements to subvert a Christian-dominated, western-centered Lebanon. Ten years later, as Nasser’s bright aura dimmed after his 1967 defeat, he did the same thing, only using PLO factions to achieve the same ends.

Even more germane is the lesson culled from the beginnings of the Lebanese civil war in 1975. It began when the Shiite and Sunni proletariat joined together to protest on behalf of better labor conditions. Western liberals thought that that solidarity was the stirring of a new non-sectarian Lebanon. The bitter 15-year war that ensued between warlords, sects, and their external allies demonstrated how wrong they were.

Yet once again, a flurry of headlines, features, tweets, and Instagram posts are focusing on the demonstrations in Beirut in the hope that they represent the beginning of a new, unified Lebanon.

Though the liberals’ focus might be on the loving French president and the promise of a Lebanese clone of France emerging on the Mediterranean, there is another picture in the background. The trained eye saw that after the massive explosion on the wharf, bearded goons in matching T-shirts appeared on motorcycles to inspect the scene—and the many soldiers from

the Lebanese army who were in the area dared not chase them away. The goons were members of the Hezbollah militia, and it was understood by all parties that they would decimate the protesters if the army did not keep them in check. Hezbollah will gun down any attempt to create a Lebanon that is truly a state of all its citizens. Macron may come and go, but the Hezbollah goons are here to stay.

The moral of the story for Israel? There are many. We can start with the so-called solutions proposed to the Israeli-Palestinian problem.

The multiple Lebanons prove that neither a one-state nor a two-state solution to the Palestine problem is realistic in practice. If the Lebanese nation cannot unify, how promising is a “one-state solution” comprising two distinct nations that are not only devoid of a historical, cultural, religious, and linguistic common denominator, but have been embroiled in a century-long mortal struggle?

And a two-state solution? The prospect of a partitioned Lebanon died during the civil war, when the Arab world refused to countenance a separate Christian Lebanon. In the long run, they will be no more tolerant of the existence of a Jewish state.

So the lesson is to keep liberal passions in check. The Middle East, aside from the realization of the prophetic Jewish return to its homeland and the creation of a vibrant democracy for all its citizens, is not a place for miracles. Israel, alas, remains the exception that proves the rule—and that will continue only as long as it remains strong and is guided by worst-case scenarios like that being played out in Lebanon today.

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