

Diversity Is Strength!

It's Also...Lebanonization

BY STEVE SAILER

With violence and chaos descending upon Lebanon once again, it's worth recalling what first transformed this one-time "Switzerland of the Middle East" into a synonym for horror:

- ethnic diversity,
- differential birthrates,
- immigration.

Sound familiar?

Although many in our ahistorical punditariat had declared that Iraq was going to be "the first Arab democracy", Lebanon was a successful democracy beginning in 1943, when it gained independence from France. It enjoyed a free press, women's suffrage (from 1953), and a booming economy centered on banks, trade, and tourism.

And then it all came tumbling down. A hellish civil war erupted in 1975 and flared on and off into the early 1990s, with 100 different militias pounding each other with artillery duels inside Beirut.

Although it's hard now to remember, during its three decades of stability and prosperity, Beirut was known as the "Paris of the Arab World". Climatically and

topographically, however, it's more like Los Angeles, which is at the same latitude. Both cities enjoy a Mediterranean climate, with mild winters and sunny summers moderated by ocean breezes. (The forecasted high for today in Beirut is 85 degrees, compared to 113 in Baghdad.) As in LA, the tourist brochures claimed you could ski in the morning and surf in the afternoon—although I've never actually met anybody that energetic.

With a superb location at the east end of the Mediterranean, Lebanon's Christian Arabs were Western-oriented, literate, and entrepreneurial. Protestant missionaries from New England founded the American University of Beirut, the premiere university in the Arab world, as long ago as 1866.

Not surprisingly, those Christian Arabs who emigrated from Lebanon and Syria to America before the 1924 reform are among the best-assimilated immigrant groups in America. Cut off from a constant influx of new immigrants after the 1920s, the Christian Arabs contributed to this country on an individual basis, without much remaking America in their own image or inordinately influencing America foreign policy.

The list of famous Arab-Americans kept updated by the Lebanese Druze disk jockey Casey Kasem (the voice of "Shaggy" on Scooby-Doo)



looks like a random selection of prominent Americans with no obvious common denominators: e.g., consumer advocate Ralph Nader, quarterback Doug Flutie, Indiana governor Mitch Daniels, Indy 500 winner Bobby Rahal, surf guitarist Dick Dale, the Sununu dynasty of New Hampshire, guitarist Frank Zappa, heart surgeon Michael DeBakey, and so forth.

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Under French guidance, the Lebanese worked out an ingenious political system. The goal of this “confessional gerrymander” was to restrict all political rivalries to within each ethnic group. The largest and most advanced group, the Christians, always got the top political post, the presidency. The Sunnis, who were second in numbers and wealth, got the number two job, the prime ministership. The rural Shi’ites were left with the speakership of the chamber of deputies.

Okay, that’s a little complicated to remember—even though it skips the details, such as the divisions between the dominant Maronites and the other Christians—but it’s not too hard to keep straight.

Unfortunately, although we are increasingly involved in that part of the world, we poor dumb naive Americans still don’t have a clue just how Byzantine the sociology and politics of the ancient Byzantine Empire remain. Just when you’ve finally figured out the difference between the Sunnis and Shi’ites, you discover that the place is also stocked with a baffling array of pseudo-Muslim crypto-religions. For example, there are the arguably quasi-Christian Alawites who run the Syrian dictatorship; their allegedly angel-worshipping cousins, the dissimulating Alevi who make up somewhere from 10 to 30 percent of Turkey; the Lucifer-loving Kurdish Yezidis of Iraq; and, strangest of all, the Donmeh, secret followers of the Jewish false messiah Shabbetai Zevi, who comprise much of the secular elite of modern Turkey.

In Lebanon, the local mystery sect is the Druze, who refuse to explain the nature of their religion. No mutually satisfactory slice of the political pie could be found for this fourth most important ethnic group.

But Lebanon’s “confessional gerrymander” worked fairly well...for while. Of course, it failed to build national parties that transcended ethnicity. But, then, those are rare anywhere.

The more serious problem: Lebanon’s demographics shifted. The constitution was based on the 1932 census, when Christians comprised 54 percent of the population. Regrettably, but predictably, the best educated ethnicity, the Christians, had the lowest birthrate and were most likely to emigrate. In contrast, the poor and backward Shi’ites proliferated—and stayed put.

As the demographics changed, the original distribution of power among the groups became increasingly contentious. The Shi’ites demanded a new census. The Christians, who predominated in the cushiest government jobs and were guaranteed half the seats in the legislature, resisted.

Then, immigration became the straw that broke the fragile Lebanese camel’s back. David Lamb, the Los Angeles Times correspondent in the Middle East, wrote in his 1988 book *The Arabs*:

Lebanon worked, however artificially, then because one group, the Christians, were clearly

in control, lesser minorities were given freedom to maneuver as long as they didn’t get too uppity and everyone who mattered was making money. Tensions and hostilities festered only beneath the surface. But in 1970 Lebanon’s delicate balance was upset.

Palestinian refugees had started arriving in 1948 and sped up after the 1967 Six Day War. Then, in the “Black September” of 1970, King Hussein of



Will demographic trends—differential birthrates, ethnic diversity, and immigration—result in Lebanonization of the United States?

Jordan turned on Yassir Arafat's Palestinian Liberation Organization and booted them out of his country. They relocated to Lebanon.

By 1973, Palestinians made up one tenth of Lebanon's population, and were radicalizing. They forged alliances with the other outsiders, the Druze. And PLO attacks on Israel brought retribution raining down on Lebanon as a whole, outraging the ruling Maronites.

On April 13, 1975, four Christians were killed in a drive-by shooting of a church. Later that day, a Maronite Phalangist militia massacred 27 Palestinians on a bus. The country descended into civil war, polarizing along Christian-Muslim lines, but with many strange alliances and rapid betrayals.

The history of that conflict is insanely convoluted, so I won't try to trace its course, but just describe a few bizarre lowlights. For example:

The Christians invited the Syrian Army into Lebanon, putting Syria and Israel on the same side, only to see the Syrians switch to backing the Muslims.

The Shi'ite masses, despising the PLO, initially cheered Ariel Sharon's Israeli invasion in 1982, but later, under Hezbollah, became Israel's implacable foe.

President Reagan sent in the U.S. military to evacuate the PLO to Tunisia, but we were sucked into a war with the Druze, of whom almost nobody in America had ever heard. The U.S.S. New Jersey battleship bombarded Druze mountain villages with 2700-pound shells from its 16-inch guns.

After a suicide truck bomb killed 241 U.S.

Marines, Reagan decided our being involved with all these mafias of Lebanese crazies was just as nuts as they were. So he got our troops out of Lebanon.

The chaos ground on for another half dozen years, turning into a Mad Max struggle between clan-based neighborhood gangs, until Syria conquered most of the country in 1990.

In early 2005, during the Beirut demonstrations against Syrian occupation, there was much fatuous commentary in America about the inevitable triumph of democracy.

One blogger got a lot of publicity for a expounding the flattering idea that pro-American democracy must triumph in Lebanon because all the hot babes go to the anti-Syrian demonstrations. Babes attract TV cameras and television rules the world, right?

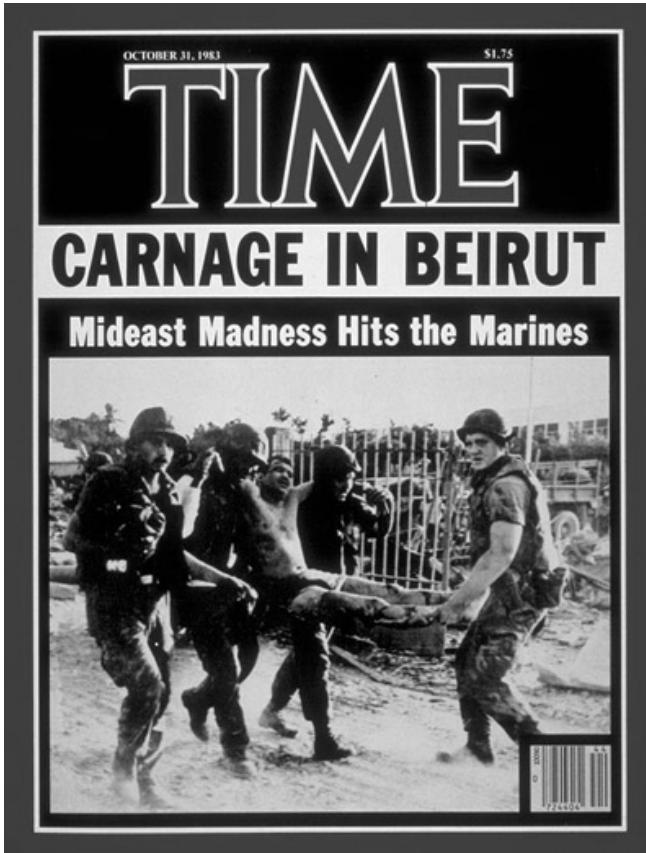
This was particularly ironic because the weakness of the Babe Theory in Lebanon was that those hot babes haven't been having enough babies. For generations, the stylish Christian women have been losing the Battle of the Cradle to the Shi'ite

women, who are too covered up to have to worry about losing their babealicious figures. If there were real, one-person one-vote democracy in Lebanon instead of the "confessional gerrymander", the hot babes would be wearing shapeless sacks tomorrow.

But don't worry about this tale of what multiculturalism can inflict on a country.

Here in America, we've all been told repeatedly that Diversity is Strength!

Yeah...and War is Peace, Freedom is Slavery, and Ignorance is Strength too. ■



Time magazine's coverage of the 1982 truck-bomb attack on U.S. Marines.