

Listen to the Lebanese People

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In 2012, I wrote an article about Lebanon that still rings true today. It ended with a quote from one of my favourite pieces written by Kahlil Gibran: "You Have Your Lebanon, I Have My Lebanon."

I am including below an extract from my July 2012 article, followed by a few comments on current developments:

"With neighbouring Syria imploding, tensions with Iran mounting and Israel ever threatening, Lebanon appears to be on the brink of conflict. But then that has been the story of Lebanon for decades now. This remarkably beautiful country filled with extraordinary people has long been a victim of its history, its own leaders and the machinations of outsiders. This may be Lebanon's past and present, but if we listen to the Lebanese people, it need not be the country's future.

"It was the French who created Lebanon and its patchwork quilt, sect-driven system of governance, designing it to serve France's imperial interests. During the past 80 years, operating within this imposed framework, Lebanon's sectarian elites have jockeyed for advantage, seeking the support of external "partners" to buttress their position. Only too obliging, these foreign "partners" all too often had their own interests to promote or scores to settle. As a result, Lebanon was time and again transformed into a battlefield where sects clashed and regional power struggles were fought.

"And so it is today.

"Two generations ago, Lebanon was an East-West Cold War battleground. Today it is an arena in which the conflict between the West and its allies versus Iran and its surrogates plays out, with fragile Lebanon hanging in the balance, and its security, stability and prosperity at risk.

'Some may shrug dismissively and say 'this is Lebanon' or point to the country's warlords and armed gangs and say, 'they bring it on themselves.'" But this recurring precarious state of affairs need not be Lebanon's fate. If we listen to Lebanon's people, it is possible to imagine a very different country, based on a common identity and sense of purpose.

"If polling has taught me anything, it is that people almost always know more than the politicians who lead them. In this regard, Lebanon's people have a great deal to say — and deserve to be heard.

"There are, to be sure, issues that divide the Lebanese. For example, two recent polls found Lebanese holding discordant views with regard to Syria and Iran... In all cases, these attitudes of various Lebanese groups, while reflecting the positions of their leaders, only tell part of the story of what the Lebanese really think. On most issues, however, there is a strong domestic

consensus, and it would be wise for leaders in Lebanon, and the rest of us, to pay attention and focus on the issues and policies that could bring most Lebanese together, not those that divide them.

“There are many places where the Lebanese find common ground. They agree on the country’s sorry state of affairs, the political priorities that must be addressed, the importance of national identity, unity and fundamental political reforms that should be enacted.

“When, for example, we ask the Lebanese whether they are better off or worse off than they were five years ago, all agree that they are worse off. Similarly, when we ask them if the country is currently on the right track or the wrong track, all groups agree that Lebanon is on the wrong track. And when we ask Lebanese to identify their top political concerns, once again there is a remarkable convergence in attitudes. All Lebanese, across the board, rank ‘expanding employment opportunities’ as their number one concern, followed by ‘ending corruption and nepotism’, ‘political reform’, and “protecting personal freedoms and civil rights’.

“What is also striking is that when we ask the Lebanese for their principle source of identity, they do not name their religion or sect, nor do they say their family or ‘being Arab’. Instead, people in all groups say that it is ‘being Lebanese’.

“When we ask Lebanese whether they prefer to maintain the sect-based apportionment system of the past or replace it with a ‘one man/one vote’ political structure, there is broad agreement that it is time to implement the latter. They all agree that national unity is a must for the country. And they reject the notion that any one group should dominate over the others.

“Almost a century ago, Lebanon’s internationally renowned poet, Kahlil Gibran, wrote a marvelous piece, ‘You have your Lebanon, I have my Lebanon’, in which he contrasted the country’s self-centered, plundering, bickering elites with the common folk who are Lebanon’s heart and soul. Gibran was right then, and his observations hold true today. Lebanon’s leaders and those who care about the future of the country ought take note, listen to Lebanon’s people, and help pull the country back from the brink, before it’s too late.”

That was what I wrote seven years ago.

For the past two weeks, the two Lebanons have been at a dramatic stand-off as sustained mass demonstrations have called for an end to old regime. They no longer want feudal dynasties governing and looting the country, nor do they want to be held hostage to an armed militia that uses threats to protect its position in this dysfunctional system. Their simple, yet eloquent, slogan has been “All of them, means all of them”.

The protests have been pan-sectarian, creative (a human chain of demonstrators holding hands connecting Lebanese from the north to the south, over 120 miles), and massive (at one point there were one and one-half million demonstrators in the streets, over one-third of Lebanon’s population).

Why were they demonstrating? Our most recent polling shows Lebanese public opinion fed up and unified, with a greater consensus than seven years ago. Today, across the board, Lebanese are even more dissatisfied with the state of their economy and more pessimistic about the country’s future. Like seven years ago, they overwhelmingly say that “creating employment opportunities” is their number one priority, but they have little confidence that

their governing institutions can deliver. There is also a growing concern about Iran's involvement in their country. All segments of Lebanese society retain a deep animus toward Israel, recalling its long occupation of the south and its repeated brutal bombardments. And they are deeply concerned about their country's inability to cope with the economic and social strains resulting from the presence of over one million Syrian refugees.

Given the depth and intensity of their dissatisfaction and frustration, no one should have been surprised when the protests began, not even Lebanon's decayed and corrupt political elite. If they had been listening to the people, they would have known that their time was up.

In response to sustained protests, the government finally resigned, despite Hizbollah's threats. But significant challenges remain if the aspirations of the protesters are to be fulfilled. To replace one sectarian/dynastic cabinet with another will not bring change. Neither will new elections based on the same sect-apportioned system.

Lebanon needs a real democratic transformation; that is what the people want. One place to start would be to implement a provision from the old 1926 constitution, which called for the creation of a one-man, one vote, non-sectarian lower house of parliament, while reserving sect representation for an upper house with limited powers. This might give the country an elected government that puts Lebanon and all of its people first.

This kind of change will not come quickly. And the old elites will not easily surrender their privileges. For Lebanon's protesters to get to where they want to be, they will need to organise a strong representative leadership, sustain their energy, design new tactics to protect the momentum of their movement and put forth a comprehensive programme for change. It will not be easy, but from what I have seen over the past few weeks, I would listen to the Lebanese people and I would not bet against them coming out on top. For the sake of Lebanon's future, I hope they do.

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