The December 27th speech of Lebanese president Michel Aoun has attracted some international interest. It is to be hoped that it would, given the situation there at present. Lebanon is a country facing many problems, as if unending, and previously reported in NEO.

The Lebanese pound has lost 90% of its value, and the National Bank president has been issued with a travel ban to stop him fleeing impending criminal action. The compromise government, the latest in endless attempts to find a model for the distribution of power which is broadly acceptable, is unable to act due to eternal infighting, with or without the spoils of corruption being involved.

Each aspect of Aoun’s speech has been covered in other stories. We are all aware of foreign interference in the country, of the inherently nepotistic political system, and of all the genuine progress made since the long civil war unravelling in weeks when a new crisis hits.

So much so that these items are no longer international news: the general response is for people to comfort themselves by throwing up their hands and saying “here we go again”. The only news reports confirm the worst, because they are an easy story, rather than question the implicit assumption that Lebanese are inherently fractious and incapable of solving their own problems.

That is why attention should focus on the one element of Aoun’s speech which is not being widely discussed. Aoun is not given to grand gestures. But he used his speech to warn that “The deliberate, systematic and unjustified disruption that leads to institutions dismantling and the dissolution of the state must stop,” as it could lead to the
“ruin of the state”.

Political columns the world over are full of visions of what might happen if a politician leaves office, or a country changes its borders, or loses its independence altogether. So if the President of Lebanon says that his country may be ruined, why aren’t people talking about what happens then? Given who the external players in Lebanon are, why aren’t our pages filled with warnings about what Israeli, Iranian or Syrian takeovers of the land and its people would mean for the West?

The answer is that the concept of the “ruin of the state” is being treated as a rhetorical flourish. No one wants to take it seriously precisely because its implications are so dark.

Principally, if Lebanon collapses, everyone else can’t blame the Lebanese and their system for their problems. When you can’t scapegoat the people any more, you have to regard those problems as within your power to solve – and then make a serious attempt to do it.

But there is also another reason, known to everyone who studied history in a Western school. One of the standard subjects is the Enlightened Despots and their era.

One of the main events of that era was the Partitions of Poland, in which a large independent country was wiped off the map by its neighbours just deciding to take bits of it. The machinations of these neighbours, and the internal weaknesses of the well-meaning and progressive Polish system of the time, created that situation.

No one did anything about it then, and no one will if it happens again. Not because they can’t, but because they don’t want to engage with the concept that it could equally happen to them, as they are not superior to Lebanese, and their own institutions could just as easily be subverted, and lead to their own destruction.

Roasting Nuts

Generations of history teachers have tacitly encouraged their students to trivialise what happened in Poland. The only Polish kings of that era they hear about are the last one, Stanislaw Poniatowski, who got the job by having an affair with Catherine the Great, and Augustus the Strong, so called because he allegedly fathered 364 children, a figure the most sceptical modern historian can’t greatly dispute.

Another subtle trick they use is failing to correct misspellings. If you leave the capital “P” off “Polish” you make it “polish”. This makes essays about the Polish question into discussions about how you keep furniture shiny, a backhanded form of racism similar to “accidentally” conflating “Lebanese” with “lesbian”.

Poland was marked by a distinctive political system in the same way Lebanon was. It was also dominated by its clans and families, but in practice governed by poor hangers-on who had titles but little else, but were determined to maintain their supposed rights for this very reason – much like the various Lebanese political and ethnic groups in their eternal squabbling over what a fair share for everybody is.

Poland had the Liberum Veto, in which minorities were accorded so much respect that a single dissenting vote would cause a parliamentary bill to fall, and all the ones which did pass be rescinded if one deputy objected to parliament continuing to sit. Lebanon’s confessional system of representation, maintained because the people vote for it despite every inducement not to, is compared to this.

However Poland eventually developed something very similar to a modern Western parliamentary democracy, long before most countries did. You don’t hear about that, because it presents the Poles of that time as not being as stupid or incompetent as the narrative has to pretend - just like no one talks about Lebanon’s historic success and wealth, and the distinct lack of inter-ethnic conflict within Lebanese exile communities.

So these silly people, in both places, had it coming to them. The interference of other powers is presented as the inevitable consequence of the stupidity of the laughable locals, as more politically credible powers were able to exploit a flawed system. So these things can’t happen in developed, diplomatically successful countries. Right?

Everything which is happening in Lebanon could equally happen anywhere else. Not because the same factors exist, but because other countries want them to exist, and try and second guess the outcomes so to make themselves exceptional.

People only want to talk about Lebanon’s problems as long as they can be made to appear Lebanese – and self inflicted; they won’t talk about the possible extinction of the Lebanese state because questions would then be asked
about why the countries which eternally pick on Lebanon have always done exactly the same.

Same Cards, Different House

In recent decades we have become quite used to countries becoming unsustainable, and being wiped off the map. Yugoslavia, the Soviet Union, the United Arab Republic, all have disappeared due to weaknesses we have been told about ever since, to disguise the fact the same ones exist elsewhere.

However in these examples ethnic and national conflicts have emerged, reenergised or been exploited by others to accelerate this process. Lebanon knows all about those. If the country were going to break up into confessional microstates it would have done so long ago, when foreign powers were trying to achieve just that, and the groups they sponsored were all fighting for Lebanon, from their different perspectives.

If Lebanon collapses as a result of the present crisis, someone the West doesn’t like will take it over in its entirety. We will then be told that this was because Lebanon’s system was inherently corrupt, and thus susceptible to the malign foreign influence which has taken it over. Really? Compared with what?

The US likes to think of itself as a model for all other states, until those states actually want to be what they think the US is. That model however includes a mechanism under which any of the 50 states can secede from the Union – not unilaterally, but through agreement, just as other breakups, such as that of Czechoslovakia, theoretically happened.

That’s part of the system, a system wise and intelligent Americans have kept in place for 250 years. Any number of foreign actors would want to cause havoc in the US, as the investigations into supposed Russian interference in the last presidential election confirmed. How could the US prevent a foreign actor with hostile intentions influencing such a decision? It can’t, in the real world.

The only way to ensure no one ever talks to, reads anything by, or comes into the orbit of a potentially hostile foreigner is to impose the most repressive police state imaginable. If you want to drive states out of the union, that’s exactly how you do it.

All countries have trade deals with others they don’t necessarily like. They also survive on foreign investment. That may not be a threat in itself. But it is if you start treating economics as a political principle, and thus making it an extension of statehood.

Nowadays, if you are a Western democracy you have to adopt neo-liberal economics. Other systems may have served you well before, but such is the agenda to equate free trade with moral integrity that all the deviants are ultimately brought into line – you can’t be a free country if you have public spending, or protection for certain industries, or a state sector which provides essential services.

This has led Western countries to seek investment from China, a reliable partner in purely technical terms because it is everything the West is not. Its state-owned companies, anathema to the West, and its repressed workforce desperate for Western labour conditions can offer a problem-free ongoing relationship, even though the West insists such partners should never exist.

Until, that is, you sell them all your infrastructure, and nothing can move in your country without the Chinese allowing it. Is it even still possible, starting from today, to prevent this? No, because the people who brought the Chinese there would rather retain their supposed intellectual superiority than help their countries, like the fading relics of the last days of Communism.

It is not policy decisions but the way the Western system works which has created this situation. The Chinese aren’t the Russians, so they must be alright. They are playing the Western game by the Western rules when in Western countries, so they must be alright. It doesn’t matter what they do back home, because Western countries can’t be Western if they don’t accept Chinese investment, whatever its purpose, whatever the strings attached and whoever is pulling them.

All Lebanese Are Created Equal

Lebanon doesn’t suffer from the usual negative connotations of the words “Middle East”. More than any other regional country it suffers terrorist violence and fundamentalist politics of different kinds, but it is seen as a victim - of itself more than others, but still a suffering jewel which the world hopes will one day shine again.
So if it isn’t there, this will be the product of the dirty games of other Middle Eastern nations, as well as Lebanese corruption and internal conflict. Will the rest of the world really stand by and just let that happen, without some strong retaliation and attempts to build a new, crisis-free Lebanon?

Of course not. If Saddam’s non-existent weapons of mass destruction were enough reason to go to war, another country walking into Lebanese territory, with or without resistance, and making it their own would be a far greater one. But nobody wants to broach the possibility that might happen because other nations have been making efforts to prevent this for centuries, and cannot face the fact they will never get anywhere.

You will never remove an invader to create a “new Lebanon”. It will always be a coagulation of historic communities trying to get along, whose “watcher cock” networks rival those of Japan.

Those communities are held together by a common Lebanese identity. There can’t be a different Lebanon because only the existing one can create Lebanese, however dysfunctional it may be at a given time.

You will save Lebanon by cleaning up its dirty politics. You will do that by giving its politicians more incentive to act properly than not. You will do that by paying them some respect. Few want the Syrians there, but they treat their friends like statesmen. Few want the Israelis there either, but they have bought off their own friends by guaranteeing they can hold their heads up high at least somewhere in their country.

But to grant respect to Lebanese, and the financial profits that will follow, you need to treat Lebanese as your equals, and their system as one as good as your own. Westerners can’t do this because of the inherent weaknesses of their own systems. This is why the extinction of the Lebanese state is the last thing they want to talk about in this latest crisis – because it’s the one thing about it most likely to happen to them.

And this contingency has been part of the larger plan for a long-time.

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