

EDITORIAL

Diversity is Lebanon's greatest strength, but only when its people stand united

Diversity has always been the primary source of Lebanon's uniqueness, that one thing that has alternately made it far better and much worse than other Arab countries. When all or most parts of the Lebanese mosaic are relatively satisfied with their places within it, the country lives up to all the praise – "Paris of the Orient," "Switzerland of the Middle East," etc. – heaped on it for generations. When significant numbers of people are dissatisfied or insecure, however, the many manifestations of what it means to be "Lebanese" actually serve to rob the term of any meaning at all.

The current crisis has many components, among them widespread disillusionment with the form and function of the state, unabashed interference by sundry foreign governments, and an undeveloped sense of how political discourse should proceed. The deleterious effects of all these factors, though, are being exacerbated by the resurgence of sectarian tensions and the tribal mentalities they reinforce. While Lebanon may be a victim of multiple vicious circles, therefore, a single substance greases all the wheels: the fact that so many Lebanese – or at least their politicians – can so easily be made to view themselves and their compatriots through sectarian lenses that filter out logical concepts like tolerance and self-preservation.

Fear of marginalization is a big part of what shapes the political cultures of the two sects whose separate and combined weights contribute more than those of any others to what makes Lebanon: the Maronites and the Shiites. Their respective demographic positions are very different, but they share a deep-seated apprehension at the prospect of being subsumed in an Arab world that is overwhelmingly Sunni. In turn, the assertiveness with which they have battled to improve their lots has unnerved more than a few Lebanese of other sects, including both the Sunnis and the Druze. It is no coincidence that, for decades and even centuries, outside powers have played on these fears to test one another's strength. And it is disappointing that sufficient numbers of Lebanese have never thought enough of their compatriots to see them – not this or that foreign patron – as natural allies.

Certainly the potential of magnanimity, and therefore for reconciliation and the rebuilding of trust, is present in large quantities. After the Israelis withdrew from most of South Lebanon in 2000, for instance, Hizbullah made a point of not tolerating persecution of those suspected of having worked with the occupation forces. And when hundreds of thousands of people (most of them Shiites) were driven from their homes during the 2006 war with the Jewish state, many of them were taken in by Maronites and other Christians. If that spirit can be injected into the daily lives of the Lebanese, most will eventually come to see that diversity is not just a characteristic of this country but its very reason for being.

WOLFGANG PETRITSCH

The EU needs a new strategy for Western Balkan accession

Kosovo's declaration of independence has put stability in the Western Balkans back on Europe's agenda. Unless the European Union acts quickly, the whole region could slide backwards, with dire social, economic and security consequences. The EU needs a comprehensive regional approach, focusing on the remaining steps that would lead each country toward membership.

The Western Balkans – a term used only since 1999 – comprises Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia (FYROM), Montenegro, Serbia and Kosovo, with a combined population of roughly 22 million. Economic developments in the region are promising, with almost all its economies posting high growth, fueled by increasing industrial output and exports. Inward investment is steadily rising, as business seems to believe that the remaining political and security challenges – the possible negative effects of post-independence Kosovo and Bosnia's malaise – will be overcome sooner rather than later.

Much work has already been done to re-establish and improve regional relations. The EU-led Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe has since 1999 successfully stimulated regional cross-border cooperation, for the first time since the breakdown of Yugoslavia. Energy, transport infrastructure – roads, railways, and waterways – and crime prevention have all benefited. The Stability Pact has now been transferred to local control, re-emerging as the Sarajevo-based Regional Cooperation Council, ready to develop regional and multi-lateral standards for its members.

The recently revived Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA) is meant to be the main regional engine for trade and business generally, and will adhere both to WTO rules and the parties' obligations toward the EU. Similarly, the South-East European Cooperation Process is one of the relatively new regional organizations that contribute to candidate and potential candidate countries' preparations for EU membership, providing the first genuine region-wide policy forum where both EU members and candidates participate.

But these bodies must not be seen as substitutes for the far more comprehensive accession process, which only the EU itself can initiate. And yet, despite the region's favorable prospects and relatively small size, the union has been slow in doing so.

Certainly, the pace of candidate countries' approach to the EU depends on the speed of their reforms. And Europe, with the vital support of the United States, worked hard to stop the carnage of the 1990s and subsequently to help rebuild the Balkan countries.

But the EU has so far failed to prepare the Western Balkans for accession, in line with its leaders' promise at their

Thessaloniki summit in 2003 to admit the Western Balkan states when they meet the union's standards.

That promise was not a matter of charity; the Balkans would add value to the EU. To be sure, the EU's lengthy internal crisis over the proposed constitution was a major distraction, and damaged the union's reputation in the Balkans. Let us hope that the new Reform Treaty will help to reassure the critics and pave the way for a new – and more robust – phase of integration.

If not, one would have to ask what had happened to the European spirit of the 1970s and 1980s, when countries such as Greece, Portugal, and Spain, which had just emerged from dictatorship and civil unrest, were welcomed into the European community of democratic states. Political decisions taken then were far more risky than those at hand in the Balkans, and the Greek and Iberian success stories demonstrate the wisdom of the courageous decisions taken at that time.

Unless Europe act quickly, the whole region could slide backwards

What about today? The most recent EU members, Bulgaria and Romania, are both in the Balkans and both are examples of countries with special needs. While the EU at first took their accession negotiations a bit too casually, it subsequently decided to continue monitoring the two countries even after accession in order to ensure that they develop the effective administrative and judicial systems that are an obligation of membership.

The EU must learn from this experience to develop an accession strategy for the Western Balkans, whose development has been delayed by a complex post-conflict transition process. Their special needs should be taken into account in any new EU approach, giving them hope while mitigating the fallout from Kosovo.

It is in Europe's interest as much as it is in the interest of the region to accelerate the integration process. A reinvigorated accession process would contribute to the EU's consolidation, both territorially and politically, while strengthening its role in its wider neighborhood – the Mediterranean, the Middle East, and around the Black Sea.

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HUGH POPE

The last chance for Cyprus, really

When he witnessed the deadly conflict unfolding between Greek and Turkish Cypriots in 1955, novelist Lawrence Durrell noted how unreal the bloodshed seemed against the background of the island's idyllic beauty. Between bouts of violence, he said, the land was "covered by the deceptive mask of a perfect spring, smothered in wild flowers and rejoicing in those long hours of perfect calm which persuaded all but the satraps that the nightmare had faded."

The killings and more than half a century have passed, but the self-deception long remained. Now the Greek Cypriot electorate – which on Sunday ousted incumbent President Tassos Papadopoulos in favor of candidates more realistic about how to find a settlement between the two sides of the divided island – has woken up to the way Cyprus's tranquility masked a recent unraveling of the predictable, if awkward, status quo. A February 24 run-off election will decide whether the new search for a solution will be under the pro-European leadership of former foreign minister Ioannis Kasoulides, who narrowly led the poll, or Dimitris Christofias, leader of the nominally Communist party AKEL.

For three decades after Turkey's invasion in 1974, stalemate ruled. Turkish troops occupied the northern third of the island, guarding the Turkish Cypriot community, about 20 percent of the total population. Ankara would not pull out unless the Turkish Cypriots got a federated state in a new bi-zonal Cyprus. The Greek Cypriots wouldn't offer their Turkish neighbors more than minority rights in the Greek Cypriots' own unitary state. The standoff held back the Cypriots economically and hobbled Turkey's integration with the West. Yet the buffer zone is normally so quiet that United Nations peacekeepers there can afford to write nature studies about the flora and fauna that has multiplied in this overgrown no man's land.

Between 2002 and 2004, there was a heady moment of hope. The Turkish

Cypriot side unilaterally opened border crossings, triggering a nostalgic rush of bi-communal visits. Turkey agreed to the UN-mediated Annan plan to withdraw its troops, backed by the United States, the European Union and, in a 2004 referendum, by 65 percent of the Turkish Cypriot voters. But this hope was extinguished when 76 percent of Greek Cypriots, urged on by Papadopoulos, voted no.

Even though Papadopoulos broke a promise to back the plan, the EU then allowed the Greek Cypriot government to join the EU as the island's sole representative. Since then, the status quo has been falling apart. Relations between Greek and Turkish Cypriots are deteriorating and putting the island on course for indefinite partition. Official contacts have all but ceased, and bi-communal meetings have dried up.

Cooperation instead of conflict with Turkey would provide large benefits

Turkey refuses, against its best interests, to honor its EU obligation to open its seaports and airports to Greek Cypriot traffic. A \$380 million EU aid program to Turkish Cypriots is stumbling over Nicosia's refusal to acknowledge Turkish Cypriot institutions created after the 1974 invasion. Ill-will on both sides means intra-island trade is minimal. EU-sanctioned Turkish Cypriot exports through Greek Cypriot ports amounted to one shipment of aluminum scrap last year. In 2006, it totaled one shipment of Turkish Delight – or "Cyprus Delight" in EU parlance.

And while until now the conflict had few implications for the outside world, there is now a big new loser: the European Union. The EU effectively imported the Cyprus problem into its inner councils, clouding its foreign, security and trade policy. Nicosia is the principal holdout against a European consensus to support an independent Kosovo, fearing that it would be a precedent for Turkish

Cypriot secession. In 2006, Greek Cypriots wielded the swing vote on EU import tariffs on Chinese shoes. Nicosia backed the protectionists apparently because of their support in the Cyprus dispute. In 2005, Greek Cypriots held up EU talks with countries in the Caucasus for six months because of a single charter flight between Azerbaijan and the Turkish Cypriot airport in north Cyprus.

At every turn, Greek Cypriots have used their EU membership to punish Turkey, notably by trying to torpedo Ankara's accession talks. The Turks, in turn, have used their membership in NATO to retaliate by blocking Cypriot and EU cooperation with the group, even in Afghanistan. Turkey is also blocking Cypriot accession to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development and even the European Center for Medium-Range Weather Forecasts.

But it is not just the EU that needs to reverse the dynamics of partition in Cyprus. Turkey has to strike a deal that will ultimately ensure the withdrawal of its troops if it is to resume its stalled enlargement talks with the EU. For the Turkish Cypriots in the north, a comprehensive settlement is the only realistic way to get their full rights as EU citizens and save themselves from dependence on Turkey. It's also their best bet to rid themselves of criminal elements taking advantage of the territory's unrecognized status to launder money and smuggle illegal immigrants into the EU.

For the Greek Cypriots, a settlement is the only way to win the withdrawal of Turkish troops from the island, recover at least some territory on the other side of the border for former refugees, and discourage the influx of Turkish immigrants into the north which threatens the island's demographic balance.

The Greek part of Cyprus south of Nicosia boasts shiny office buildings and showy restaurants, but all is not well. A tourism sector aimed at cheap holidays for Britons is sagging. Cyprus's membership in the EU and the euro zone means that making money off a free-wheeling

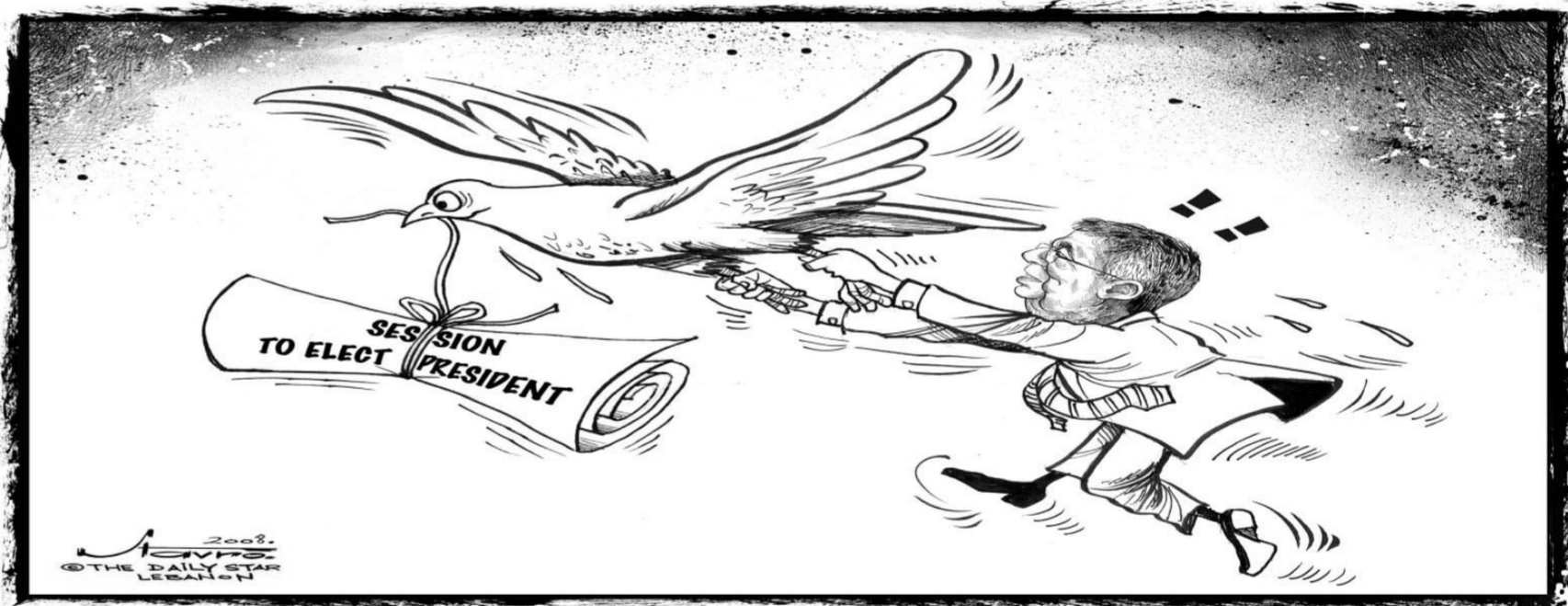
offshore banking system is no longer an option. Lying 70 kilometers from the Turkish coast and 4,650 kilometers from Brussels, Greek Cypriots need normalization with Turkey if their service industries are to become an East Mediterranean hub.

All the countries in its neighborhood, even Greece, are pursuing policies of detente and cooperation with Turkey, the region's biggest and most dynamic economy. Syria, once the standard-bearer for Greek Cypriots against Turkey in the Arab and Islamic worlds, reopened a ferry route to the Turkish Cypriot port of Famagusta in October.

Cooperation instead of conflict with Turkey would provide large benefits. Greek Cypriot hoteliers could, like the Greek island of Rhodes, be filling empty rooms with newly well-off Turkish tourists. Turkey's ban on Greek Cypriot vessels has helped push the Greek Cypriot merchant fleet from fourth down to 11th in the world. Ending a sense of being a gated community in the wrong neighborhood will persuade more well-qualified young Cypriots to stay home rather than seek opportunities elsewhere.

Greek Cypriots should realize that Turkish Cypriots are growing stronger in the world and will not give up and join a unitary Greek Cypriot state. Similarly, Turks should understand that the only way to persuade Greek Cypriots to settle will be through normalization and persuasion, not threats, as when Ankara hinted at a military escalation during a 2007 oil-prospecting dispute. Once the Greek Cypriot presidential elections this month are out of the way, all sides should appeal to the UN to return to mediate a comprehensive settlement. This time, it may really be the last chance.

Hugh Pope is a senior analyst for the International Crisis Group, which recently published a report, "Cyprus: Reversing the Slide to Partition." He is the author of "Sons of the Conquerors: The Rise of the Turkic World" (Overlook Duckworth, 2005). This commentary is published by permission.



GAMAL A. G. SOLTAN

Guidelines of a new Egyptian policy toward Gaza

The recent breach of Egypt's border with Gaza accentuated the risks implied in the current situation in the territory. Losing control over that border for 10 consecutive days proved to be embarrassing for Cairo. Bending to the plot implemented by Hamas operatives embarrassed Egypt even further. Far more serious than just the embarrassment, the infiltration of suspect terrorists into Egypt is a major security concern for a country that has been in a continuous war on terror for 30 years.

The collapse of order at Egypt's border with Gaza encouraged both Hamas and Israel to capitalize on the developing situation. Seeking both de facto recognition as the legal authority in Gaza and the relaxation of the Gaza blockade, Hamas demanded the dismantlement of the multilateral arrangements regulating the crossing between Egypt and Gaza, allowing Hamas a say if not a monopoly on the operation of the Palestinian side of the crossing.

On the Israeli side, some watched with joy as Hamas took former Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's disengagement plan with Gaza a step further. Shifting the burden of Gaza from Israel to Egypt and the elimination of Israel's legal responsibility over Gaza is an Israeli dream that is coming true thanks to Hamas. Moreover, the farfetched proposals entertained by some in Israel to enlarge the tiny but overpopulated Gaza Strip through the annexation of adjacent Egyptian territories demonstrated the recklessness in dealing with pillars of regional security and order encouraged by Hamas' plot.

Restoring order on Egypt's borders with Gaza was the immediate concern in Cairo. It took 10 days to end the breach, and now require an overhauling of

Egypt's policy toward Gaza. The Hamas takeover of Gaza in June 2007 widened the gulf separating Gaza from the West Bank. The ideological and political rivalries between the Palestinian Authority (PA) in the West Bank and the Hamas government in Gaza make it unlikely the current fissure in Palestine will be bridged in the near future. The Hamas-controlled Palestinian entity in Gaza is likely to survive for a long time.

A long-term policy rather than the ad-hoc arrangements of the past is badly needed. Egypt's approach to Gaza is guided, or rather constrained, by a number of considerations. For one, Cairo should not be perceived as participating in the Gaza blockade. Contributing to the suffering of fellow Arabs could hurt the sufficiency of any Arab government.

On the other hand, Egypt should not contribute to the consolidation and legitimization of the Hamas regime in Gaza. A radical Palestinian entity on the Israel-Egypt border could further complicate the already strained relations between the two countries. Moreover, containing the Hamas-led government in Gaza is an integral part of the efforts of moderate Arab governments to curb the rise of radical Islam in the Middle East. The blockade imposed on the territory exposes Hamas' weaknesses and might, in the long term, cause the fall of Hamas from power, or force it into reconciliation with the legitimate PA in the West Bank.

Third, moves that would change the current legal status of Palestinian territories could further destabilize the region and threaten vital Egyptian interests. Such changes should be only in the direction of the establishment of a united Palestinian state within the 1967 borders. Transitional or interim arrangements are

welcome as long as they contribute to the materialization of the two-state solution.

Egypt needs to strike a balance among these three major considerations. Hamas should be denied the leverage of using the plight of the Palestinians in Gaza to further enhance its power. It is the political and ideological choices of Hamas, not Egyptian policy, that further worsen humanitarian conditions of the Palestinians in Gaza. Yet Egypt should also avoid being depicted as if it is contributing to the Gaza blockade. Necessary commodities should be allowed into Gaza in a regulated way. Should Hamas, the PA and Israel

Egypt should not remain hostage to Palestinian and Israeli politics

continue to fail to reach a working arrangement toward this end, border crossings on the Egypt-Gaza border could be a substitute. Alleviating the suffering of the Palestinians in Gaza while denying Hamas the opportunity to claim victory should be the principle guiding the movement of goods into Gaza. Movement of individuals, on the other hand, should be highly restricted: an uncompromising policy toward attempts to replicate the recent breach of the border should be made clear and credible.

The success of a new Egyptian policy toward Gaza is better served if Egypt succeeds in securing the cooperation of interested actors, particularly the PA, Israel, the United States and the European Union. Unfortunately, the chances of winning Israel's and the PA's cooperation look limited. But Egypt should not remain hostage to Israeli and Palestinian

politics. On the other hand, there is a reasonable possibility of winning the cooperation or at least the understanding of the US and the EU, particularly the latter.

At the same time, avoiding the complete alienation of both Israel and the PA is essential for Egyptian national interests. Egypt should keep consulting Israel on all relevant issues, including security arrangements at the border with Gaza. It should also make clear that a change of policy toward Gaza does not breach Egypt's policy toward the PA as the legitimate representative of the Palestinian people.

For Egypt, the border breach might be a mixed blessing. The crisis at the Gaza border allowed the Egyptian government the opportunity to defuse mounting domestic pressure to help the people of Gaza. At the same time, the flooding of Egypt's borders with hundreds of thousands of foreigners and the accompanying violations, revived in Egyptians a latent national identity that is sometimes overshadowed by the supranational Arab and Islamic identities. It also evoked past memories – when Egypt was dragged into conflicts provoked by reckless regional actors.

Decision-makers in Egypt have always believed that the situation that developed in Gaza after last summer is not sustainable. The pilgrims' crisis of last December, in particular, demonstrated the difficulties implied in the situation. However, winning the needed domestic and international support for a new policy was unlikely prior to the incidents of recent weeks.

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