

## Lebanon Today The Phoenicia of Yesterday<sup>1</sup>

**Fernando Ayala\***

It has never been easy to understand what is happening in Lebanon. Homeland of the Phoenicians and cradle of civilizations crossed by Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, among many others, including Alexander the Great, until the recent military invasions of Syria and Israel. The country was under the rule of the Turkish Empire for 400 years until the end of the First World War, in 1918. Year in which France declared it its Protectorate until 1943, when it granted independence. The colonial powers, England and France, defined its borders, naturally responding to their interests after the partition of Palestine in 1948, to create the State of Israel. The great Syria, which included what today is Lebanon, Palestine, Jordan and other territories, disappeared and was reduced to its current borders. Only in 2008, Damascus established diplomatic relations with Lebanon in a de facto recognition of its independence. Today, the number of inhabitants is estimated at 6,082,357 million<sup>1</sup> even though the last census was made in 1932<sup>2</sup>. These are divided into 18 religious creeds among Sunni Muslims, Shiites and Alawites; Christian Maronites, Greek Orthodox, Armenian Catholics, Melkites and Protestants along with Druze, Chaldeans, Assyrians, Copts. Which, among many others, make up the country of only 10,452 km<sup>2</sup>, which means a density of 582 inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup>.

Lebanon has the largest number of refugees per capita in the world, about 33% of the population, where Syrians reach 1.5 million and Palestinians approximately 500 thousand. The figures are contradictory, and many times those of the government do not coincide with those given by the United Nations Agencies for Refugees, UNHCR, or those of the United Nations Agency for Palestine Refugees, UNRWA. It is easy to imagine that this high concentration of refugees generates political costs for the Lebanese government and for those who wish to maintain the Christian character

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of the country. However, Sunnis and Shiites today make up most of the population, with the difference that among the first are the Palestinian and Syrian refugees, people “transitorily” installed in Lebanon and with limitations of their civil rights.

The small detail is that the Palestinian refugees are there since 1948, the year in which the first camps opened to house the thousands who had to flee their country after being left without a homeland or a passport due to the Israeli occupation<sup>3</sup>. There are currently 12 camps that concentrate around half a million Palestinian refugees, to which a significant percentage of Syrians has been added. Since the opening of the first camps, almost 4 generations of refugees have been born and raised in difficult conditions: they live in crowded Beirut neighborhoods, with precarious schools, hospitals, nursing homes, housing and markets organized autonomously and where the Lebanese police does not enter.

I had the opportunity to visit the camps of Burj El Barajneh and the best known by the international community, Sabra and Chatila, where in 1982 between 2,500 and 3,500 women, men and children were massacred by an armed Lebanese Christian group instrumentalized by Israel. It was proven to be a refined intelligence operation, where Israeli agents created the conditions through terrorist acts in Beirut to justify the subsequent killing<sup>4</sup>. In conversations with policy makers and the hospital director of one of the camps it is easy to perceive the frustration and despair about the future. While they are grateful for Lebanese hospitality, they are second-class citizens who can study at universities if they pay but cannot exercise their professions or access Lebanese citizenship ever. In the camp of Burj El Barajneh, which gathers around 18,000 thousand people, an average of 50 children per month are born. One of the survivors of Sabra and Shatila, as well as the political leader of Burj El Barajneh were born there, in 1952. All their lives waiting to return to Palestine. For its part, the war in Syria has caused around one and a half million refugees to cross the border, installed in precarious camps and often together with the Palestinians. The Syrians at least know that they have a country - destroyed, but that exists, and where they will probably be able to return with the support of the United Nations that will protect them from possible reprisals once the pacification is achieved.

The other side of the coin is the Lebanese population that has had to receive these hundreds of thousands of people with their dramas, in a country where national identity is perceived by religion, which divides cities and neighborhoods in Christian, Sunni or Shiite areas. Granting Lebanese nationality to refugees would substantially change the composition of the country and its tradition. Also, some Arab States and many of the Palestinians themselves do not wish to be given citizenship because it would deprive them of the right to return to Palestine, which is what Israel expects to happen. Naturally, all this generates confusion and the search for equilibria that are very fragile. A diplomat, with several years working in Lebanon, told me that: “Rather than a cohabitation between religious creeds, there is a mere coexistence”. The country has already known two civil wars (1958 and 1975-1990), of which the latter left an undetermined number of deaths, estimated between 100 and 200 thousand. Lebanon is a creation of two colonial powers that have responsibility for what happens there.

Or, in the words of a prominent Israeli historian: “The Syrian, Lebanese, Jordanian and Iraqi nations are the product of fortuitous borders drawn in the sand by French and English diplomats ignorant of local history, geography and economics. He adds, it was especially the French who decided who would be Syrian and who would be Lebanese”<sup>5</sup>. The myth of Beirut being the “Switzerland or the Paris of the Middle East” due to the degree of economic, religious and cultural freedom it enjoyed for a short period, was fueled for a while. However, the reality was stark: two civil wars, and the manipulation and intervention of the intelligence services of the great powers and neighbors of Lebanon. The hard facts are that of a country with several countries inside plus second-class citizens, such as refugees, segregated and marginalized. Israel not only occupies a portion of its territory in southern Lebanon in what it considers a security belt, but regularly violates Lebanese air and sea spaces.

This helped legitimize the creation and presence of Hezbollah<sup>6</sup> - the armed resistance opposed to Israeli bombing and invasion which won the sympathy of most of the Lebanese. An Israeli ambassador told me that: “There is no possibility of establishing any kind of relationship with Israel and less while it is keeping a part of Lebanese territory occupied”.

A sense of frustration is perceived among the Lebanese regardless of their religion, because of the political and economic situation. According to the survey and report of the German foundation Konrad Adenauer, published in February 2019, 77% of Lebanese are pessimistic about the future while 95% believe they are on the wrong path and 40% link their pessimism with corruption. The economy has grown only between 1 and 3% in the last decade, public debt reaches 152.9% of GDP and Moody’s agency lowered its credit index from B3 to Caa1<sup>7</sup>. Many investors know about the rich potentialities of the country and its people but are aware of the impossibility of materializing important infrastructure projects due to the latent threats to the country’s security and the instability of the region. What was Phoenicia, the culture that gave rise to the first articulated alphabet of 22 words, from which trade expanded, colonies were founded all over the Mediterranean and which houses marvelous cultural and archaeological treasures, home of the great poet Khalil Gibran, is today a laboratory where the interests of the great powers are mixed with the Lebanese national interest, which in turn is marked by the religious visions of the main groups that make up the country. A few seem to care about the future of the Lebanese. As one prominent businessman and connoisseur of the history of his country told me: “They do not let my country die, but they do not let it live either”.

## References

<sup>1</sup> Líbano registra un incremento de su población.

<sup>2</sup> There were then 875,252 inhabitants, where Christians constituted 51% and Muslims 49%. This determined the distribution of the highest political positions in the State at the time of independence. So, the president is Christian, the Prime Minister Sunni Muslim and the president of the Parliament is Shiite Muslim. All demographic projections indicate that Muslims today reach about 64% against 36% of Christians, and this is the reason why a new census has not been

carried out since it would significantly alter the distribution of power.

<sup>3</sup> The United Nations notes in a 2016 report that there are 504,000 Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. It states: “The Palestinians are deprived of certain basic rights. Lebanon excluded Palestinian refugees from 73 job categories, including professions such as medicine, law and engineering. They are not allowed to own property, and they even need special permission to leave their refugee camps. Unlike other foreigners in Lebanon, they are denied access to the Lebanese health care system. The government refused to grant them work permits or permits to own land. The number of restrictions has been increasing since 1990”.

<sup>4</sup> Both the United Nations and Israel proved the responsibility of the intelligence services of the latter country through the so-called Kahan commission, which meant the dismissal of the defense minister Ariel Sharon, who later, in 2001, would become Prime Minister.

<sup>5</sup> Yuval Noah Harari, *De animales a dioses*, Santiago: Penguin Random House, 2014, page: 399.

<sup>6</sup> Party of God created in Lebanon in 1982 in response to the Israeli invasion. Participated in the elections for the first time in 1992, winning 12 seats. In the last elections of 2018 it increased to 13, that is, it obtained 15.8%, being the country’s greatest political force.

<sup>7</sup> Survey conducted by Statistics Lebanon Ltd. for Konrad Adenauer Foundation (KAS).