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THE NEXT CRUSADES

Many years ago, I read a book called “The Quiet American” by Graham Greene. Its central character is a high-minded, naive young American operative in Vietnam. He has no idea about the complexities of that country but is determined to right its wrongs and create order. The results are disastrous.

I have the feeling that this is happening now in Lebanon. The Americans are not so high-minded and no so naive. Far from it. But they are quite prepared to go into a foreign country, disregard its complexities, and use force to impose on it order, democracy and freedom.

Civil war: Lebanon. Lebanon is a country with a peculiar topography: a small country of high mountain ranges and isolated valleys. As a result, it has attracted throughout the centuries communities of persecuted minorities, who found refuge there. Today there are, side by side and one against the other, four ethno-religious communities: Christians, Sunnis, Shiites and Druse. Within the Christian community, there are several sub-communities, such as Maronites and other ancient sects, mostly hostile to each other. The history of Lebanon abounds in mutual massacres.

Such a situation invites, of course, interference by neighbors and foreign powers, each wanting to stir the pot for its own advantage. Syria, Israel, the United States and France, the former colonial master, are all involved.

Exactly 50 years ago a secret, heated debate took place among the leaders of Israel. David Ben-Gurion (then Minister of Defense) and Moshe Dayan (the army Chief-of-Staff) had a brilliant idea: to invade Lebanon, impose on it a “Christian major” as dictator and turn it into an Israeli protectorate. Moshe Sharett, the then Prime Minister, attacked this idea fervently. In a lengthy, closely argued letter, which has been preserved for history, he ridiculed the total ignorance of the proponents of this idea in face of the incredibly fragile complexity of the Lebanese social structure. Any adventure, he warned, would end in disaster.

At the time, Sharett won. But 27 years later, Menachem Begin and Ariel Sharon did exactly what Ben-Gurion and Dayan had proposed. The result was exactly as foreseen by Sharett.

Anyone who follows the American and Israeli (there is no difference) media, gets the impression that the present situation in Lebanon is simple: there are two camps, “the supporters of Syria” on the one side, the “opposition” on the other. There is a “Beirut Spring”. The opposition is a twin sister of yesterday’s Ukrainian opposition, and loyally imitates all its methods: demonstrations opposite the government building, a sea of waving flags, colorful shawls, and, most importantly, beautiful girls in the front row.

But between the Ukraine and Lebanon there exists not the slightest similarity. The Ukraine is a “simple” country: the east tends towards Russia, the west towards Europe. With American help, the west won.

In Lebanon, all the diverse communities are in action. Each for its own interest, each plotting to outfox the others, perhaps to attack them at a given opportunity. Some of the leaders are connected with Syria, some with Israel, all are trying to use the Americans for their ends. The jolly pictures of young demonstrators, so prominent in the media, have no meaning if one does not know the community which stands behind them.

Only thirty years ago these communities started a terrible civil war and all of them massacred each other. The Christian Maronites wanted to take over the country with the help of Israel, but were defeated by a coalition of the Sunnis and Druze (the Shiites played no significant role at that time). The Palestinian refugees, led by the PLO, who formed a kind of fifth “community”, joined the battle. When the Christians were in danger of being overrun, they called on the Syrians for help. Six years later, Israel invaded, with the aim of evicting both the Syrians and the Palestinians and imposing a Christian strongman (Basheer Jumail).

It took us 18 years to get out of that morass. Our only achievement was to turn the Shiites into a dominant force. When we entered Lebanon, the Shiites received us with showers of rice and candies, hoping that we would throw out the Palestinians, who had been lording it over them. A few months later, when they realized that we did not intend to leave, they started to shoot at us. Sharon is the midwife of Hizbullah.

It is difficult to foresee what will happen if the Syrians accede to the American ultimatum and leave Lebanon. There is no indication that the Americans are concerned with the creation of a new fabric of life for the Lebanese communities. They are satisfied with babbling about “freedom” and “democracy”, as if a majority vote could create a regime acceptable to all. They do not understand that “Lebanon” is an abstract notion, since for almost all Lebanese, belonging to their own community is

vastly more important than loyalty to the state. In such a situation, even an international force will be of no help.

The re-ignition of the bloody civil war is a distinct possibility.

Civil war: Iraq. If a civil war breaks out in Lebanon, it will not be the only one in the region. In Iraq, such a war - if almost secret - is already in full swing.

The only effective military forces in Iraq, apart from the occupation army, are the Kurdish "Peshmerga" ("Those who face death"). The Americans use them whenever they are fighting the Sunnis. They played an important role in the battle of Faluja, a big town that was totally destroyed, its inhabitants killed or driven out.

Now the Kurdish forces are waging a war against the Sunnis and Turkmens in the north of the country, in order to take hold of the oil-rich areas and the town of Kirkuk, and also to drive out the Sunni settlers who were implanted there by Saddam Hussein.

How can such a war be practically ignored by the media? Simple: everything is swept under the carpet of the "war against terrorism".

But this small war is nothing compared to what may happen in Iraq, once the time comes for deciding the future of the country. The Kurds want complete autonomy, or independence by another name. The Sunni would not dream of accepting the rule of the Shiite majority, which they despise, even if came about in the name of "democracy". The outbreak of a full-fledged civil war may only be a question of time.

Civil war: Syria. If the Americans succeed, with our discreet help, in breaking the ruling Syrian dictatorship, there is no assurance at all that it will be replaced by "freedom" and "democracy".

Syria is almost as splintered as Lebanon. There is a strong Druze community in the south, a rebellious Kurdish community in the north, an Alawite community (to which the Assad family belongs) in the west. The Sunni majority is traditionally divided between Damascus in the south and Aleppo in the north. The people have resigned themselves to the Assad dictatorship out of fear of what may happen if the regime collapses.

It is not likely that a full-scale civil war will break out there. But a prolonged situation of total chaos is quite likely. Sharon would be happy, though I am not sure that it would be good for Israel.

Religious fervor: Iran. The main American objective is, of course, the overthrow of the Ayatollahs in Iran. (It is a little bit ironic that at the same time the Americans are helping to install the Shiites in power in neighboring Iraq, where they insist on

introducing Islamic law.)

Iran is a much harder nut to crack. Unlike to Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, this is a homogenous society.

Israel is now openly threatening to bomb the Iranian nuclear installations. Every few days we see on our TV screens the digitally blurred faces of pilots boasting of their readiness to do this at a moment's notice.

The religious fervor of the Ayatollahs has been flagging lately, as happens with every victorious revolution after some time. But a military attack by the "Big Satan" (the US) or the "Little Satan" (us) may set fire to the whole Shiite crescent: Iran, South Iraq and South Lebanon.

And here, too. Israel, too, has recently witnessed a tiny civil war.

In the Galilean village Marrar, where a Druze and an Arab Christian community have been living side by side for generations, a bloody incident suddenly erupted. It was a full-fledged pogrom: the Druze fell upon the Christians, attacking, burning and destroying. By a miracle, nobody was killed. The Christians say that the Israeli police (many of whose members are Druze) stood aside. The immediate reason for the outbreak: some doctored nude pictures on the Internet.)

It is easy to ignite a civil war, whether out of fanaticism or out of intolerable naivete. George Bush, the (not-so-)Quiet American, runs around the world hawking his patent medicines, "freedom" and "democracy", in total ignorance of hundreds of years of history. Hard to believe, but he draws his inspiration from a book by our own Nathan Sharansky, a very small genius, to say the least.

Every human being and every people has a right to freedom. Many of us have shed their blood for this aim. Democracy is an ideal that every people has to realize for itself. But when the banners of "freedom" and "democracy" are hoisted over a crusade by an avaricious and irresponsible super-power, the results can be catastrophic.