

International agenda for the new leader

by Chibli Mallat

We noted early in the series the limited margin of manoeuvre left for the president on the regional and international level. These constraints, we had argued, were the result of president Hrawi effectively assuming power thanks to the Syrian military intervention on 13 October 1990, one full year after he had been sworn in. His necessary reliance on Syria to bring the machinery of government back to life meant that the debt to the Syrian president would carry on throughout his mandate and beyond. The regional margin of manoeuvre for the next president will be no less constrained. In pure logic, then, there is little point discussing any regional agenda. Within these constraints, however, a projection of Lebanon onto the Arab and Middle Eastern plane may still be possible on two levels, which must be conceived within the frame of Lebanon's weakened position after 16 years of civil war, and its reliance for social peace on the goodwill of Damascus. These two dimensions of an international agenda are the subject of today's and tomorrow's articles.

The two levels can be designed functionally as a cultural, as opposed to a political, approach. On a time scale, the long-term cultural approach may serve as a background to the other, shorter term, political approach. How, considering the constraints just delineated, can Lebanon offer any leadership from within the Arab world? A positive answer can be sought in the cultural multi-dimension which Lebanon has enjoyed for more than a century.

With the emigration of some of its best talents during the civil war, itself following several large-scale emigration waves since the late 19th century, the country should try to benefit from the international dissemination of our brain drain as I argued last year, there is immense potential for an advanced research centre, both for science and the humanities, to tie in our higher education system with the best export brand of Lebanon: its thinkers. Beyond what some institutions like the UN-sponsored Tokten have undertaken, there is a reservoir of Lebanese manpower inside and outside the country which can be identified under a general "cultural" dimension. This human reservoir arguably operates as Lebanon's most important strategic asset. It is on that intellectual powerhouse that an enhanced role for Lebanon towards a renewed leadership of the Arab world must be based. By this is meant cultural leadership, which may be seen as the continuation and aggiornamento of our famed contribution to the Renaissance of the Arab world, our Nahda of the 19th and early 20th century. There is another historical prism which can serve for the "cultural leadership" argument. Until the 16-17th century in Europe, the world system did not know of states as the main subjects of international relations.

Fernand Braudel has magnificent pages in his classic *La Méditerranée et le Monde Méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II* about the slow passage, in the northern shores

of the Mediterranean, from a logic of empires to one of states. In the southern and eastern Mediterranean (and indeed in the Habsburg-dominated part of Europe), the passage to statehood came only after the seismic transformation brought about by the first world war. It is only then that the logic of empires has given way, reluctantly, to the nation-state system prevailing in the industrialised world. The Ottoman Empire broke asunder, and the state logic became dominant.

What's that got to do with a regional agenda for a Lebanese president? For someone like myself, who is caught in his education between two university systems French and Anglo-American while appreciative of the unique tradition of Arab excellence in the arts from an unbroken genetic chain for four generations, the key to the country is its 1,000 planes of cultural interaction.

My reflection was prompted last year by a stroll into the current fabric of the books that are being published in Lebanon less than a decade after it has recovered from the war slumber. It came when the BBC radio service asked me for a serendipitous visit to a Beirut bookshop, and the reaction to what one may find in them. The intellectual promenade heightened a sense of the extraordinary facets of Lebanese culture in which people, sometimes the same ones, operate culturally in Arabic, French and English. This is not just English used for business, or French in the Dalloz-model for generations of lawyers. It is a veritable operation of creativity in the two core western languages which puts Lebanese authors on a par with the best writers abroad, functioning, unlike them, in their mother tongues. This is a tradition which brings Lebanon to the fore of world culture, in English and in French, over much of the century of our statehood. The prominence of the Khalil Gibran and the Nadia Tuenis in English and in French are pointers to a rather wide phenomenon of literary excellence.

And then, of course, there is Arabic. As during the Nahda, Lebanese Arabic is slowly reasserting its century-old leadership. Witness the dominance of the Arab scene by the Lebanese al-Hayat for the written press itself the result of the excellence of the an-Nahar and as-Safir journalists for several decades. In the broadcasting field, both LBC and Future stations have, in less than two years, emerged as the dominant satellite beamers to households across the Arab world. This is no less true in the multi-cultural scene of our music festivals, which have been slowly regaining the lost ground of our international fame in the 1960s and 1970s.

These are random examples. Without versing in petty nationalistic gloating there are setbacks, like the disappearance of L'Orient Express and the Beirut Times, as well as the emergence of new cultural landmarks, like The Daily Star such instances should be seen for what they represent in terms of the remarkable international projection, over the two past centuries, of Lebanon as an idea.

Part of the idea is grafting French and English cultures onto Lebanese Arabic. As boldly put by Ghassan Tueni, who has given contemporary Arab culture a unique institutional anchor for over half a century, "how long can we continue to write in

Arabic ideas from the West if we're incapable of reading the West in its own languages?" It is on this basic openness to the world from within its cultures and languages that the pursuit of the cultural leadership of the Arab world, and of the Middle East, should be contemplated by a new president.

Since political leadership is not possible in the traditional manner, what he can best offer is the drive towards a serious cultural renewal which integrates three world cultures rather than see them as fighting a triangular zero-sum battle of territories. In this way, the difficult replacement of the logic of empire by the logic of states can be enhanced, on a communal level, by a new form of Gemeinschaft, where the individual multi-linguistic creativity is enhanced in arts, science and the law.

This is the tenth article in a series on the presidential elections contributed Chibli Mallat, an attorney and a professor of law. to The Daily Star. Tomorrow: regional agenda